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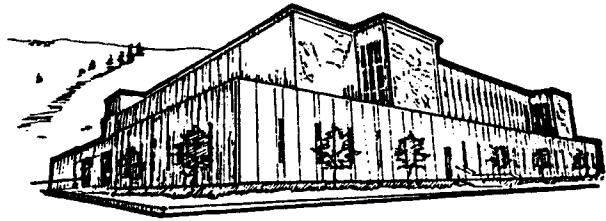
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SIX STORIES

by

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

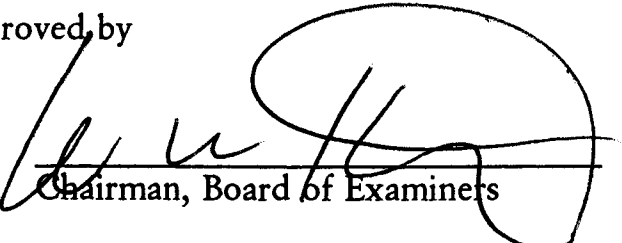
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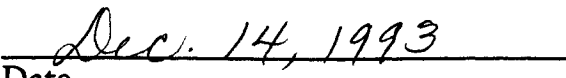
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REUNION

Garrett shuts the cabinet and holds the rifle in his hand. Tonight he will kill that damned dog. All night, it just sits out there and wails and moans. Sometimes it will come right up to the front door until Garrett has to get up and chase it off. Garrett hasn't had a full night's sleep since that dog started coming around. He's going to take care of it tonight.

Garrett loads the rifle, just two shells. His father used to say an empty rifle was a useless rifle. Garrett sets the rifle on the couch and puts on his coat, an orange hunter's coat. He pulls his wool hat over his brown hair, low enough to cover his ears, then picks up the rifle and walks outside.

It is cold, that's all he can think about, cradling the rifle. Wind is ripping over the long, flat fields from the north, loose snow in the air like a thick fog. Today it got so cold, another record was broken. It was the fourth day in a row of dangerous cold. If this deep freeze went on, the trees would freeze through and explode.

The dog is not far away. Garrett can hear the howling clearly. It's a miracle that dog survived as long as it has in this cold. Garrett is walking

eastward, following the sound of the dog's wailing, taking big, powerful steps through the foot-deep snow.

Garrett doesn't see the dog until he is less than 20 feet from it. The dog is a mutt, all scraggly brown, gray, and white. Garrett lifts the rifle and aims.

The dog stops howling, looks directly at Garrett. It is thin.

Garrett can't pull the trigger. He lowers the rifle.

The dog starts a low, steady growl.

Killing it would be right, Garrett thinks, I would be putting an end to its misery. He lifts the rifle and tries again, but he can't do it. He fires two shots into the air, and the dog runs off. "And don't come back!" Garrett shouts before turning around and walking home.

Garrett is in bed when he hears the doorbell, ringing again and again. He looks over at his alarm clock. 2:37. His first thought is that the dog is back, that it has learned how to use the bell, but he dismisses the idea almost immediately. It's probably some driver with a dead car, he thinks, some driver who either wants a place to sleep tonight or to call a gas station. Garrett grabs his robe and goes downstairs.

He opens the door, and the first thing that hits him is the cold.

Then he sees Reese.

"Jesus, Gar," Reese says, walking in, "took you fucking long enough to open the door considering it's so fucking cold and all." Reese laughs.

A woman walks in after Reese, carrying an old brown suitcase packed sloppily with sleeves hanging out. Garrett takes the suitcase from the woman and says, "Here, I'll take that."

"Let her carry it," Reese says. "She needs the exercise."

Garrett holds the suitcase. It is heavy.

"Jesus, Gar," Reese says, "how long's it been? Six, seven years?"

"I'm Wren," the woman says. "Wren. Like the bird." She extends a hand for Garrett to shake. Wren is short and pretty. She looks young, like a high school homecoming queen.

Garrett puts the suitcase down and shakes her hand, which is warm. This surprises him since she is not wearing a coat or gloves. She's wearing fall clothing, a green turtleneck and blue jeans. Her hand is so small it fits entirely inside his. She smiles. Garrett thinks he might blush.

"I saw the truck in the garage," Reese says. "I can't believe you still got that thing. It still run?"

"Yes," Garrett says. The truck is a 1943 Ford that Garrett has restored perfectly, down to the paint. The paint is a shade of red Ford

didn't make anymore. Garrett is proud of the truck. He drives it in parades.

"Good truck," Reese says. "How much you figure it's worth?"

Garrett doesn't understand why Reese is talking about the truck, but he answers anyway. "I don't know," he says. "I've never thought about selling it."

"Look, Gar, I need to stay here a while, just till some shit settles. I'll use my old bedroom, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," Garrett says. "I'll make your bed." He pauses. "You two can get some food in the kitchen. There's not much there. I haven't been shopping in a couple weeks because of the cold." He pauses again, waits for Reese to say something, but Reese stays silent. "There's some bread," Garrett says, quietly, "and some breakfast sausage. You could make sandwiches." He looks at Wren, then picks up the suitcase. It surprises him that a woman that small could carry something this heavy. "You know where the kitchen is," he says to Reese. "I'll be down soon." He starts upstairs.

"Here," Reese says, putting a hand on Garrett's shoulder, "take this." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wad of bills. He rolls two fifties off the top and forces them at Garrett.

"No, really. I don't need it." Garret does not believe in taking money from blood.

"Take it," Reese says. "It's for Wren, you know, rent money and shit."

"No, no thanks. I don't need it."

"Take it," Reese says. "You'll hurt Wren's feelings."

Garrett looks over at Wren. She is running a hand through Reese's hair. She is smiling. Her teeth are perfect white. Garrett takes the money and goes upstairs.

Garrett stares at the carnival photograph of Reese, his face attached to the oversized painted body of a circus strongman. He blows dust off the picture frame, then pulls the old sheets off the bed. The sheets have not been changed in years and are gray with dust. Garrett remembers Reese shorter, but thinks it's either bad memory or the three-inch heels on Reese's boots. And he's shaved the moustache he had since high school, Garrett thinks. Reese's face looks bigger and dumber without the moustache. And he let his hair grow way too long, down past his shoulders.

Reese and Garrett are twins, and Garrett thinks the only thing they have in common is the birthday.

Garrett unfolds the fresh sheets. He can hear Wren's voice from the kitchen, but he can't make out the words. Garrett wonders how old she is and what she's doing with Reese. A girl that pretty could have much better if she wanted it, he thinks. He fluffs the pillows and decides it's probably better to just not think about her. She was Reese's problem. Garrett doesn't want anything to do with it. In a few days, when the cold would let up, Garrett would ask Reese to leave, and he would have to. Reese wasn't supposed to come back anyway.

* * * * *

Garrett puts on a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans before going back downstairs. He stands outside the kitchen for a second, holding his hand to the door, standing completely still, before pushing the door open and walking in.

Reese and Wren are sitting at the kitchen table, passing a bottle of Scotch back and forth. It is more than half-empty.

"Hey," Reese says, "Welcome back. I never figured you a Scotch drinker. Anyway, this is all I could find. I put some cash down where I

found it, you know, to pay for it. Have a drink, my treat." Reese hands Garrett the bottle, then starts to laugh. "Never figured you a Scotch man."

Garrett gets some glasses from the cabinet over the sink.

"Put those back," Reese says. "Don't dirty no glasses when the bottle's just fine. Unless you're afraid of drinking from the same bottle as us."

Garrett puts the glasses back.

"Any glasses," Wren says. "Not, 'no glasses.'"

Garrett takes a quick swig from the bottle. He buries the urge to flinch.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Reese asks.

"Yeah, guess so. Especially in this cold." Garrett sets the bottle on the table, not knowing if he's supposed to pass it to Wren or Reese. He leans back against the sink.

Wren takes the bottle and has a long drink. "You know what I think?" she asks. "I think if you killed someone out there, they probably wouldn't find the body until the spring thaw," she pauses, "and I bet the body would be in perfect condition, just like if it was in a freezer."

Reese looks up at her, then says, "Just shut up, Wren, shut the fuck up." He lifts his hand as if he is going to hit her, but doesn't.

"I think I'd better go to bed," Garrett says. "I've got a big day tomorrow."

"No," Reese says. "We gotta talk. Wren, get the fuck upstairs."

Wren takes another hit off the bottle, gives Reese a hard look, then leaves the room. Garrett thinks she might get lost. It's a big house. She doesn't know which room to go to.

"Sit down," Reese says.

"I like standing," Garrett says. He stands up straight.

"Okay, stand. I don't fucking care. Look, Gar, I'm not gonna try and bullshit you. You're my brother. Me and Wren, we're in a shitload of trouble. I need, we need to stay here a few weeks, maybe even a few months, until all this shit blows over."

Outside, the dog starts to howl.

"How long?"

"I don't know. There's a lot of shit to blow over. There are people out there," Reese says, "want me and Wren dead. I'm not making this up."

The dog keeps howling, louder now. He's probably coming closer to the house, Garrett thinks.

"I know I'm not supposed to be here," Reese says, "but you gotta help me. We're blood."

The dog keeps howling. Garrett looks out the kitchen window, but it's too dark outside. All he sees is the reflection of the kitchen light.

"Jesus Christ," Reese says, slamming his fist on the table, "what the fuck is that noise?"

"It's just this stray comes around. I just ignore it."

Reese goes to the window and throws it open. The wind blows in hard, and the kitchen is flooded with cold. "Shut the fuck up!" Reese screams, hanging his head out the window. He shakes his head from the cold, then grabs the bottle and takes a long drink.

The dog starts barking, short little yips.

Reese goes to the living room. Garrett shuts the window, turns the latch, locks it.

Reese returns, holding the 30-06 and the little orange box of shells. He sits down at the kitchen table and loads the rifle. "I'm gonna kill that stupid fucker," he says. He stands up, leaving the cardboard box on the table, then goes outside, no coat, no hat, nothing.

Garrett closes the door behind Reese. He puts the box in the silverware drawer.

The dog barks, then the loud report of a rifle. Then silence, then another shot.

The door swings open, and Reese walks in. Garrett flinches.

"Jesus Christ, it's cold out there," Reese says. "My dick almost froze off." He laughs, then takes another long drink, finishing the bottle. "We'll talk tomorrow, okay?" he says. "I'm going to bed."

When Reese leaves the room, Garrett sits down. He puts his head down against the table. He has a headache. He sits up again, looks around. The kitchen is a mess, cigarette butts dropped all over the place, ashes flicked anywhere. Garrett stands up. He gets the broom from the pantry and starts to sweep up. He sweeps everything under the stove. He puts the broom away, then tosses the empty bottle into the trash can.

Wren enters the kitchen. "Hey," she says.

Garrett nods. He can't think of anything to say.

"He passed out. We can talk about him and shit and he won't hear a damned thing." Wren sits down, puts one leg up on the table. "Have any smokes?" she asks. "I'm dead out."

"No," Garrett says. "I don't smoke."

"Good for you. I shouldn't, but I do."

Garrett looks down at the ground, then back up at Wren. He looks at her hands. Every finger has a ring. "Are you two married?" he asks.

"Shit, no," Wren says. "If there's anything my mother taught me, it's never get married. Marriage just fucks things up. I say people should just screw around a bit, and when they can't do that anymore, they should just

die. You know what makes me sick? Old people. All they do is sit around and wail about how things used to be when they're really talking about how they used to be. I can't tolerate self-pity."

"Oh," Garrett says.

"So what do you do around here all day?" Wren asks.

"Nothing much. I can't really do anything until spring."

"I couldn't take that. I need shit to do or I stagnate."

"I like your name," Garrett says.

"It's just another one of my father's curses on me. He really liked birds."

"Do you want some coffee or tea or something?" Garrett asks after a long silence. "I've got some lemon tea that's very good."

"I hate tea," Wren says. "Have any wine? I could go for a glass of wine."

Garrett opens the refrigerator door and pulls out a half-empty bottle of Gallo. "Here," he says, setting the bottle on the table. "It might be sour. It's been in there a long time."

"When I was a little girl," Wren says, standing up, "my dad used to throw me on the kitchen table and screw me. Right in front of my mom sometimes. Just threw me on the table and screwed me."

"Oh," Garrett says, embarrassed, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Wren says, lifting the bottle. "It's just something that happened years ago. It's really nothing." She drops the bottle to the floor, spilling wine everywhere. She grabs Garrett by the shoulders and pushes him down on the table, kisses his neck, licks his face, then gets up and says, "There'll be more later. Clean up this mess."

She leaves the room, and Garrett hears her footsteps on the stairs.

The first thing Garrett does in the morning is turn on the weather station to find out how the day will be. It will be cold again, with no relief in sight. This is the worst cold snap in the history of the state. People are dying. The governor is talking about declaring parts of the state natural disaster areas. Temperatures above zero, the governor jokes, would be considered a heat-wave.

Reese and Wren come down together, holding hands. Reese is wearing a bright yellow sweater and gray slacks. Wren is wearing jeans and a blue sweater that belongs to Garrett. It's an old sweater, not even one of his favorites, but still, Garrett thinks, she could've asked for it.

"Jesus, Gar, you look like shit. When'd you get up?"

"Early," Garrett says, standing up. "Do you want coffee?"

Wren and Reese sit down. Garrett tries to avoid looking at Wren.

"Gar, I gotta go out today. I need to borrow a winter coat, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," Garrett says. He looks over at Wren, just for a moment, but long enough to notice her smiling at him.

"Sit down, Gar," Reese says. "You're always up. We don't bite."

Garrett sits down next to Wren. Her hand moves up and down his thigh.

"Look, I gotta go take care of shit. I don't know how long I'll be gone. Gar, can I take your truck? My car's dying from the cold."

"No." You can have anything you want, Garrett thinks, but you can't have the truck. Wren's hand is still on his thigh, but it stops moving.

"Gar, my tires are shot. It's not safe."

"No," Garrett says. The truck is mine, he thinks.

Wren unzips Garrett's jeans, moves her hand inside. Garrett puts his hands on the table, clenching them into tight fists.

"Okay, fuck it. I don't care. I'll take the car." Reese leaves.

Wren is on Garrett immediately afterward. They start on the kitchen table, but after falling off the table, move to the living-room sofa. Garrett feels clumsy. He enters her, then doesn't move at all. He shuts his eyes. Wren keeps talking, but Garrett can't understand a word she's saying. She kisses him, and he responds with a shiver. She kisses him again. It's been over a year for Garrett. He opens his eyes and sees Wren, then sees the

open window, and beyond the window, all the way to the trees, 100 yards away. They roll off the couch to the floor. Garrett apologizes. He fumbles his way back into his jeans. He feels ill because he likes having Wren there, the warm at his side, and he knows it's wrong even to think about it. He thinks he could fall in love with Wren, and that makes him feel worse.

"I'm going to kill him," Wren says. "I hate him. I hate everything about him. And I take it you hate him as much as I do."

Garrett can't determine the tone in her voice. It is completely flat. He slaps her. He has never hit a woman before. He has never stolen a woman before. His hand stings. He runs up the stairs to his bedroom. He sits down on his bed.

Wren knocks on the door. "You know where to find me if you want more," she says.

Reese returns exactly at noon. Garrett panics when he hears the door open. "Hey," Reese shouts, "I'm back. I bought shit for dinner."

Garrett takes a few deep breaths. He wants Reese to leave. He wants these people out of his home. He wants them out of his home as soon as possible without getting Reese suspicious.

He hears Wren running down the stairs, hears her say, "Reese, darling, I'm so glad you're back. I worried so much. I missed you." She was talking loud enough for Garrett to hear everything clearly. He knows she is doing this on purpose. Never let a woman have an edge, Reese always says.

"Garrett wasn't good enough company?" Reese asks.

"He was fine," Wren says. "He was a perfect gentleman. But I missed you so much."

"Hey, Gar!" Reese shouts. "I bought groceries. Get down here!"

Garrett stays completely silent. He has a vague hope that maybe Reese will just go away, just disappear. He's done it before.

"Hey, Gar! Get down here! You're not sick or anything?"

"No," Garrett says, realizing that Reese wouldn't just go away. He decides it would be better to go downstairs. It would be impossible to stay in his bedroom forever. "I was just thinking about things," he says. He goes downstairs.

"Look what I found," Reese says, pulling a can from a brown paper bag. "Mandarin orange slices. Wren makes this orange and chicken thing that you gotta taste. She was going to school to be a cook when I met her." He pinches Wren. "Jesus, Gar, you look dead. You know what you need? You need more sleep."

"I guess so," Garrett says. "I don't sleep a lot."

"You should sleep better now," Reese says, "now that I got rid of that fucking dog."

"Sleep and a good breakfast," Wren says, smiling at Garrett. "They're a lot more important than most people think."

Garrett has to look away. "Guess so," he says.

Wren looks through the bag. "Rice," she says to Reese. "You didn't get any rice. Can't stuff a chicken without rice."

"I might have some rice in the kitchen. I'll go look."

"And lemons. You didn't get any lemons."

"Jesus, Wren, you try getting fucking lemons in the middle of fucking winter in the middle of fucking nowhere." Reese's face reddens. Indian face, he calls it.

"You could've got lemon juice. I'm sure as hell they had lemon juice. Big green bottle, says 'lemon juice' right on it."

"I'll go look for the rice," Garrett says.

Dinner is awful. Garrett picks at the under-cooked chicken, the too-sweet oranges, the sticky rice. Maybe I'm just not used to this type of food, he thinks. Garrett never makes anything special because he only has

to cook for himself. Sometimes, he'll make a cake from a box, but that's about it.

Reese finishes quickly. "Jesus, Wren," he says, "you're one fucking excellent cook. This is good restaurant-quality stuff." He turns to Garrett. "See," he says, "didn't I tell you Wren was a really good cook?"

"It's really good," Garrett says, still picking at his food. "I like this a lot."

"Don't expect Wren to say much. She hates compliments. Some people are weird like that."

Garrett stands up. "I'll clear the table," he says, picking up his plate and glass. He wants to get to the kitchen so he can throw the chicken out.

"Sit down," Reese says. "Let Wren do that. We've got some talking to do. Important talking. Wren, clear the table."

Wren grabs one plate and storms into the kitchen. She slams the door behind her.

"Jesus," Reese says, practically whispering, "I wonder why she's so bitchy all of a sudden. I don't understand that girl, but I love her. Women, you can't live with 'em and you can't live with 'em." He laughs, then, seriously, adds, "Never let a woman have an edge."

Garrett looks down at the plate.

"So, anyway, I've got this friend named Jerome. Well, Jerome is coming up here tomorrow, and he might have to stay awhile. That okay with you? I mean, we could get him a hotel room, but I figure we've got all these rooms, why not use them?"

"Yeah, okay, I guess," Garrett says. This is not what he wants to say. His voice sounds off to him. He wonders if Reese has noticed this. "If it's not for too long. I guess he can sleep in the guest room."

Wren returns, takes a fork, then goes back to the kitchen, slamming the door again.

"Hey, Wren, honey," Reese says. "You know, it goes faster if you take more than one thing at a time."

"Fuck off!" Wren shouts from the kitchen. "If you don't like the way I do things, do them yourself!"

Reese puts a hand on Garrett's shoulder and says, "Never let a woman have an edge."

Garrett nods.

"You're lucky she doesn't have an edge on you," Reese says. "I love her. She knows that. That's her edge on me. I'm trapped." He smiles.

"So," he says, leaning in, "Jerome can stay, right?"

Wren returns, grabs a glass, then goes back to the kitchen.

"Yeah, sure," Garrett says, answering Reese and trying to ignore Wren.

"Hey, Wren, while you're in there, look for something to drink, okay?"

"Fuck you," Wren shouts. "Why don't you get up off your fat ass and look for yourself?"

"I'm not gonna get mad. I'm not gonna get mad," Reese says, very quietly. He takes a deep breath. "Jesus," he says, "what'd I tell you? Can't live with 'em and you can't live with 'em." He laughs, shakes his head, then stands up. "I'm going upstairs to use the phone if that's all right with you, okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Garrett doesn't like the idea of leaving his home, but decides it might be best just to leave, at least for a few weeks, just take the truck and get out. "Go right ahead."

Reese goes upstairs, and Garrett goes straight to the rifle cabinet. He doesn't know why he's taking the rifle. He just knows he doesn't want Reese to have it.

Wren steps out of the kitchen. "Well," she says, "this is unexpected." She walks over to Garrett, stands right next to him.

Garrett drops the rifle. It lands on the sofa, then bounces to the floor. Garrett is shivering, but he's trying to hold himself perfectly still. "If you can't handle it, I'll do it," Wren says. "I don't mind."

Garrett shuts his eyes, concentrates only on keeping himself from shivering. There is a long silence.

"Well?" Wren asks. "All I need to know is that you're with me on this."

Garrett feels sweat forming on his brow.

"Well?" Wren asks again, then, immediately, "Okay, fuck it then." She takes a step back. "I'm telling him everything." She starts up the stairs, but stops at the landing. "I'll tell him everything." She waits again, then vanishes around the corner.

Garrett stoops down and picks up the rifle. He walks to the hall closet. He puts on his coat, but figures he doesn't have time for his boots. His arms are quivering.

Reese comes down the stairs slowly. Garrett can't see him, but he can hear the footsteps. Garrett puts his hand on the rifle, even though he knows it is empty.

"If you're even thinking of going for that rifle," Reese says calmly, "I'll shoot you in the fucking arm."

Garrett takes his hand away, lets the rifle drop to the floor. He stares at the door in front of him.

"You really think I'd kill you?" Reese asks. "I should, but I can't. We're blood, like it or not, and right now, knowing we've got the same blood makes me feel like shit." Reese is standing directly behind Garrett now. "I really want to teach you a lesson here, goddammit." Reese picks up the rifle. "Turn around," he says.

Garrett does. Reese holds the rifle less than an inch from Garrett's chest. Garrett knows the rifle is empty, knows the shells are in the kitchen, but he doesn't move. He's thinking about Wren, wondering what she's doing, where she is, what she's thinking.

"Wren tells me you and her got some pissy little thing going, well, okay, fuck it. You want her, have her. I don't fucking care. I'm getting the fuck out of here, and I'm taking your truck. I figure it's the least you owe me." He shakes his head. "Jesus," he says, "you can't trust blood anymore. It's a fucking strange world, blood. Give me the keys."

Garrett stands completely still. He thinks about hitting Reese, but something is stopping him, holding his hand back.

"The keys," Reese says.

Garrett throws one punch, hitting Reese right under the jaw. Reese nails him in the chest with the rifle butt. "Stupid fucker," Reese says.

Garrett tries to stand, but can't find the strength. He hands Reese the keys.

Reese throws the rifle clear across the room. It lands by the kitchen door. He grabs his suitcase and is gone. Garrett hears the garage open, the truck pull off.

Garrett pulls himself up using a doorknob for support. He wants Wren to come downstairs, to help him to the couch, to tell him that she does love him, that they are in love. Then he hears a second car start. He opens the front door and sees Reese driving off in the truck and Wren behind him, driving the car. She gives him a small wave like from a float in a parade.

Garrett goes to the kitchen and puts some water on for tea. Now is Jerome coming or not? Garrett clears the table, does the dishes, then makes up the bed in the guest room just in case.

BEAUTY MAKES HERSELF UGLY TO FIND TRUE HAPPINESS

One afternoon, Martin Silver decided to tell his wife everything. He walked into her studio, sat down and told her he had too many secrets. Sun was coming in from the bay windows casting long shadows against the walls and the hardwood floors. Monica asked him if he'd been drinking, and he admitted that he had, but that this wasn't about the drinking. "This," he said, trying to sound as sober as possible, "is a matter of conscience." He leaned forward in his chair, bringing his face as close to hers as possible without falling over.

Monica asked him if it could wait. She was on the floor, surrounded by photographs, clippings from magazines and newspapers, and pieces of broken glass. She was working on a new collage; this is what she did, collages. Often, Martin impressed himself by thinking how unlikely it was for him to have an artist for a wife, and then impressed himself further by thinking about how young she was, 23. Martin was almost double that, and he didn't like his work, the selling of houses.

"You see," Martin said, "I'm not the best of all possible people. I have done bad things." He had planned this opening in the other room

and thought it would intrigue her, make her turn, stop what she was doing, listen. Instead, she continued to work, arranging photographs on the floor. She moved two feet further from Martin, walking on her knees. "I've done bad things," Martin said, "many bad things. Many very bad things." Still no response. "I want to tell you," he said. "I *will* tell you."

Monica turned to him. She brushed hair out of her eyes. She had beautiful hair. Martin loved her hair, loved the feel of it. "I had a fortune cookie one time," she said, slowly and calmly, like a mother would tell a child an important safety tip like, "Keep your hands off the stove," or "Never swim by yourself."

"The message was," she continued, same voice, same tone, "'Too much truth can be a dangerous thing.' Don't tell me anything I don't want to hear. Whatever you have done," she put a hand on his knee, "you are forgiven for."

"You don't know what I've done," Martin said. This wasn't how he had pictured the scene. He wanted difficulty. He had always wanted the marriage to be more difficult than it was. He wanted arguments, long arguments that would end with sentimental apologies, but Monica offered none of this. She forgave too easily, offered comfort too quickly. Martin had tried once to start an argument over this, accusing her of not listening, of just forgiving. He told her it wasn't right, it wasn't honest. She replied

that it was very honest, that she loved him so deeply that she was willing to forgive anything, and that ended the argument. Martin would not let this one end so quickly, so happy an ending. "It's not just one thing," he said. "It's not just one worst thing."

"It never is," Monica said. She handed him two eyes cut from a cosmetics advertisement. "Here," she said, "look at these. They're so beautiful. I want them behind some glass, looking out from behind some glass. What do you think?"

"I was in the other room, you see, and I got to thinking about the things I've done, about all the bad things I've done, and the list, this list in my head was just getting longer and longer. It's obscene. It's an obscenely long list. I tried cataloguing these things, bad things, worse things, tried to find a single worst thing, but it wasn't easy." Martin could feel the gin in his stomach, moving uneasily. He had started drinking too early, at the start of the first game, Detroit at Chicago. He was drunk by half-time. It had been unintentional. It wasn't a good game, Chicago having scored three times in three possessions, making the first quarter score 17-0. Martin had decided to drink only on every Chicago first down, and soon finished a half bottle of gin and was out of tonic water.

"Don't worry about it," Monica said. "Whatever you've done, I'm sure I've done worse. And I'm younger." She turned back to the magazines on the floor.

"I'm even looking at the little things I've done, the minor transgressions, and they're adding up. They take on negative aspects in accumulation. I used to be a shoplifter--candy, small toys--that kind of crap, and now I'm thinking I didn't just do this once or twice, I'm thinking I've done this hundreds of times. It was a habit. It wasn't just youth. It was more than that. It was sheer malice, I think. I'm no better than a petty thief. I was seven. I was stealing screwdrivers. What does a seven-year-old need with a screwdriver? I was stealing for the sake of stealing. That's not youth. That's sociopathic behavior."

"I love the way you talk when you're drunk," Monica said. "I love the way you try to sound so articulate." She did not turn back to face him. "You're not a sociopath."

Martin looked at the back of Monica's head, then down at the floor, then to the window. "Sometimes," he said, "I think I'm still in love with one or the other of my ex-wives. Sometimes it's one and sometimes it's the other. I look at you, and I think you lack that something that made me love my other wives. It's only a temporary thing. The feeling passes. But it happens."

"That's the problem with ex-wives," Monica said. "It's not unusual. When I was having an affair with my art history professor, he kept comparing me to his wife. 'You have Sheila's eyes,' he would say. Sheila, that was her name. Sheila. He would say these things like I was supposed to be flattered. I would light a cigarette, and he'd say, 'You light your cigarettes the way Sheila lights hers.' It annoyed me for awhile, but I got used to it. I'm pretty adaptable." She never looked up at Martin. She cut a nose from a magazine, another model, another cosmetics advertisement.

Martin stood up. He tried to make the action dramatic, but his legs wobbled, and he almost fell. He tried to push the chair aside, but it fell over instead. He liked the accident of it. The better gesture was knocking the chair over. "Damn it," he said, "that's the problem, goddammit. You're always turning these things to you. This isn't about you. This is me. This is all me. This is my story." He paused, waiting to see the reaction, but there was none. He set the chair back up. "This is *my* story," he repeated. "This is what I have to tell you."

Monica looked up at him. She smiled. Smiling, Martin thought, she's goddamn smiling. It was the small moments, the small gestures, the smiles at the wrong times, that Martin hated, that made him feel as if he deserved an ulcer. "I'm sorry," he said. He surprised himself. He had not expected these words. He thought he might blush, that he felt that warmth

in his cheeks. This, he thought, would have been the worst luck. It would have entirely deflated his credibility, but the blush never happened. Some natural instinct, Martin thought, kept it in check.

"I had this class once," Monica said, "this psychology class. The whole point was how the artist deals with the failure of the audience to respond in the intended way."

Martin nodded and sat down again, expecting a long story. He looked directly at Monica, but only half-listened. She said the artist, resentful at first, responds with anger, great, undirected anger. Martin put his hands on his knees and leaned forward.

"Then," Monica continued, "given a little distance, the artist changes either the media, the intended audience, or the intention of the art. Think about Picasso."

Martin thought of nude women done in geometric shapes and of the very old man curled around a guitar, all in shades of blue. Monica was still talking, saying that Picasso started out doing mediocre portraits, that no one liked anything he did.

"The subjects were unimpressed," she said. "The critics just didn't care. Picasso was pissed."

Martin nodded again.

"He swore he'd never paint again," Monica continued. "He tried poetry."

"Poetry?" Martin asked.

"He fucked that up too. Two years later, he went back to painting. This time, he did cubism. He became famous."

Martin was confused, but refused to admit to it. He assumed she had some point she was trying to make, and that he was just missing something. Maybe he was drunker than he thought. "Oh," he said. He sat back straight in his chair. He knew he had something important to say, but he couldn't think of it. He couldn't put words to it. Sometimes it was difficult to appreciate Monica, he thought, because she was smarter. His phrase for it was exponentially smarter.

Monica turned back to the collage. She moved a headline from a tabloid from the top to the bottom. "What's better?" she asked. "If I put it up here, I'm giving it too much importance. It looks like *the* important thing, like I'm pumping theme in forcibly. If I put it down here, it looks like I'm consciously trying to avoid putting it on top."

Martin had two questions and chose the easier. "What's it say?"

"Beauty Makes Herself Ugly to Find True Happiness."

Martin recognized the headline. He had seen it a few weeks earlier while waiting in the check-out line. A model had scarred herself, slashed

lines across her face because she felt out of touch with what she referred to as the real world. Her fiancé had approved of the whole thing. He was quoted extensively in the article, more than the model herself. He said he was flattered by her actions.

"I don't get it," Martin said. He shook his head, stared out the window. "Sometimes I don't get what you see in me. I'm stupid, and I'm ugly, and I'm mean."

Monica smiled. She said she liked the fact that Martin wasn't afraid of self-pity. She kissed his knee, something she had never done before.

Martin leaned back in his chair. He scowled. She had done it again, deflated the scene. She hadn't let him make his points. The things he had wanted to say were still there, lined up in his head, waiting to be said.

"I mean it," Martin said. "Sometimes I still love my ex-wives. Sometimes I think I love them more than I could ever love you."

"That's okay. Sometimes I think about ex-boyfriends. And you, I'm probably worse than you. Sometimes, when we're making love, I picture you being someone else, someone more physical, younger."

"Really?" Martin smiled. "Who? Who do you think of?" He didn't know why, but he felt flattered by this.

"Usually it's Corey Landrich. He was a football player, a running back. He had the best body. All his muscles were perfect lines. We only

had sex once, and it was beautiful, but it didn't work out. We weren't compatible. He wasn't very smart. I think if he'd been just a bit smarter, just one more flicker of intelligence, I would have stayed with him, married him, probably would have had three beautiful children. I'm worse than you. You just think about old love. I speculate on it. I create visions of how love could have gone. That's worse. I'm the villain here."

Martin stood up. "A football player?" He felt joy. "Wow," he said, "a football player."

"He's not the only one."

Martin started laughing. "Wonderful," he said. He wanted another drink, a celebration drink, a glass of wine. "A football player," he said, then repeated it. He nodded. "That's wonderful."

"I'm glad you approve," Monica said. "What if I cut this in half? Put 'Beauty Make Herself Ugly' at the top, and 'to Find True Happiness' at the bottom. Does it work? Do you think it works?"

"I had this story I was going to tell you," Martin said, slowly. "I thought it was an awful story, but now I think it's a love story, a variation on a love story."

"Maybe I don't need the headline at all," Monica said. "I don't want to depend on words."

"I was 13," Martin said. "Jack's part of this." Jack was Martin's brother, his older brother. He had died four years earlier. Martin didn't speak of his brother often. The death had been reported in some newspapers, the trash papers, a freak accident. Jack had been driving cross-country, Maine to California. He was driving through New Mexico when a truck carrying lumber tipped. Jack's car was crushed under the weight of the wood. "Trees Kill Driver in New Mexico Desert," a headline read.

"Maybe if I had another headline to balance out the bottom."

"This is a good story," Martin said. "You should listen."

"I'm listening," Monica said, "but I'm working, too."

"This isn't a big long sprawling thing. It's a specific incident, a single moment."

"Go on," Monica said. "I'm listening." She cut lips off the cover of *Vogue*.

"I was 13. Jack was 17. This was 1957, maybe '58, somewhere around there, '57 or '58. No, I was 14. I was a freshman at Gregor Mendel. Jack was a senior. He was a golden boy type. Football star, basketball star, track team, swim team, and he was smart. He wasn't just a dumb jock. Damn near straight A's."

"I know all this. I've heard all this before."

"It's important. It's background. A story's not a story without background." Martin enjoyed the feeling of making the scene his. He would not give Monica the chance to deflate his story. "I was 14," he said. "Not very bright, not very popular, not very anything."

"That's very 14," Monica said.

"Just listen. This is my story. This is a love story. You like love stories. There was a girl . . ."

"There's always a girl. She's swooningly beautiful, isn't she?"

"She was 15, but had matured quickly. Large breasts, lovely face, the whole bit."

"I don't like the headline. It's too obvious, too theme."

"Would you like some wine? Would you like me to open a bottle of wine?"

"But if I don't use the headline, it's just images without theme, and that's too 1977."

"I don't want to open a bottle if I'm the only one drinking. I just want one glass. It's not worth opening up a whole bottle for just one glass."

Monica said she could flip a coin, heads would mean she kept the headline, and tails, headline out. "A concession to randomness," she said.

Martin saw her plan. She was trying to flatten his story. "Her name was Monica," he said. "Monica Bernard." He lied. The girl's name was really Ellen, but using the name Monica would be more effective.

"You have a thing for Monicas. That's lovely."

"She was beautiful. She inspired lust. I was in love with her, but that wasn't unusual. There wasn't anyone who wasn't in love with her. She was beautiful, absolutely and truly beautiful. She had movie star looks. She looked like Rita Hayworth, like Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*."

"Lovely," Monica said.

"This is where Jack comes in. This is why it was important to talk about Jack. Girls loved Jack the way boys loved Monica Bernard. But I wasn't jealous. I didn't hate Jack because of this." Martin paused. "Jack was my brother. I loved him. I damn near worshipped the guy. I *did* worship him." Another pause. "It was impossible not to. He was the type of man other men worshipped. It's hard to explain."

"The joy of the inexplicable."

"Don't interrupt," Martin said, curtly. Then he apologized. "I'm not angry," he said. "Don't think I'm angry."

Monica flipped the coin. "Heads," she said. "Headline's in."

"Try and imagine the situation. I'm the brother of the boy all the girls love and in love with the girl every boy loves."

"Caught between extremes, or something like that," Monica said. "A classic story, a classic scenario."

"Jack knew I loved Monica Bernard. It wasn't a secret. I had her name written all over my notebook. 'You like her?' he asked me. 'You really like her?'"

"I thought he was going to set up a date, something like that. I thought he was going to use his influence, pull a few strings, something like that, but that didn't happen. It didn't happen that way. This is where the story gets interesting, I think." Martin leaned back in the chair. He looked at Monica, wanting to see if there was any change in her body language, any evidence of her being hooked. He saw nothing. She was kneeling over her collage, moving pieces around, reimagining compositions.

"Go on," she said. "I'm listening."

"Remember, this is a love story. Jack used to think his mission in life was to provide me with experience, and he saw this as a great potential for experience. The way he talked it up, I thought he'd arrange for me to have sex with this girl, this angel, this vision."

"But that didn't happen. That would be the predictable turn in the story. I think I can guess the ending. Can I tell it?"

Martin tried to interrupt, but she gave him no chance to say anything.

"He tells you to be someplace," Monica said, "some secluded place, a small clearing in the local woods. There's a clearing and good place to hide. It's a pretty famous place, a local landmark. It has a name."

"The Hole. We called it the Hole."

"Jack tells you to be at the Hole, something like 10 minutes after school has let out. 'Don't take the bus home,' he tells you. 'We'll walk home together,' he says. Am I right so far?"

"This is the easy stuff," Martin said.

"So you go there, this Hole, this secret place, and you're waiting. You don't know what to expect. You've been told to be completely quiet. Not to move. And you do this. You wait and wait."

Martin wanted to say something, but no words came to mind. He opened his mouth as if he hoped words would physically force their way through the space, but nothing happened.

"They show up. She's nervous, but she's smiling. This is a dream for her. She's with Jack Silver, local icon. She doesn't realize her own legendary status. She's that type, beautiful without trying. She doesn't see what all the fuss is about. Or maybe that's all just an act, this false modesty. It only makes her more attractive."

"It was sincere," Martin said. "She was genuinely modest."

"Yes, probably," Monica said. "Jack takes off his coat. He sets it on the ground. She sits down. 'Thank you,' she says. You're watching. You're 14. Your idea of sex is still nothing but imagination. You've got an erection. You're fidgeting, but trying not to. Jack unbuttons her blouse. He's fondling her breasts. Jack takes her blouse off. She's worried about people, about someone coming by, but Jack tells her to be quiet, not to worry about a thing. Now she's topless. You're amazed. Jack takes off his shirt, and now we can skip ahead. They're both naked. You watch them make love. Big experience. Is that it? Is that how the story goes?"

"No," Martin said. "I turned away. I didn't watch. That's why it's a love story. I turned away. This scene was all done for me, a gift from Jack, all acted for my benefit, and I turned away. I couldn't watch. I walked home."

"Should I keep the headline?" Monica asked.

"What?"

"The headline. You decide. Should I keep it?"

"And her name wasn't Monica. It was Ellen. Ellen Bernard."

"Yes," Monica said. "I knew that, but I didn't want to interfere. It was your story."

"It's a love story," Martin said. It was all he could think of.

"I know that story. I used to be the girl in that story."

Martin knelt next to her. "Ellen Bernard. That was her name."

"I'm thinking a second headline would work, provide balance. Look at this," Monica said. She handed Martin two pages from a newspaper.

The headline read, "Make One Million Dollars Overnite," the misspelling intentional. "I don't get it," Martin said.

"Not the headline, the subtitle."

"It's Easier than You Think," Martin read aloud.

"Does it work?" Monica asked. "What do you think? Does it work?"

GRACE

Marsh Anders looks just like his sister. That's what everybody says. He doesn't like it. It's not an easy comparison. He plans to grow a moustache when he is older, maybe even a full beard, anything he can do to make himself look different. It's not because he doesn't love her, he does. He just doesn't want to look like her.

Grace. She is 17, but looks older. Marsh is 11, but looks younger. He has soft features, just like hers. They both have dark hair and blue eyes. Around town, Grace is considered a prize catch.

Grace says she thinks she's in love, but not all the way. His name is Barton Stokeley. He comes by every night, bringing flowers. Grace says she doesn't know what to do about him.

Grace is telling Marsh all about it at the breakfast table. They are alone. Their father has already left for the day. He leaves early because he is the sheriff. He will not return until the late evening. Their mother has been dead seven years now, having driven her car into a tree during an ice storm.

"I like Barton," Grace says. "Really I do. I like him a lot. I think I probably love him, but I'm not sure. What do I know about being in love? I can't be sure. I don't want to make any choices until I'm sure. Does that sound right?"

Marsh shrugs his shoulders. Marsh never speaks. Some people say it's because he's a little slow, but that's not true at all. Grace says it's because Marsh is very private, but this isn't true either. Marsh suffers from verbal apraxia--his mouth refuses to make the sounds his brain intends. The condition is painfully frustrating. Marsh knows words, knows how they're supposed to sound, but he can't say them. When he was younger, he would spend his time alone practicing the act of speaking, hoping that he could work his way through the apraxia, but he never succeeded. He has since given up. His dreams are often of nothing more than him speaking.

"At some point," Grace says, "I'm going to have to make some decisions, and I just don't want to. Not yet. I'm still young. I shouldn't be forced into any decisions."

Marsh nods, although he's not sure what he means by it. He wishes Grace would talk about something other than Barton.

Grace puts her forehead to the table. "Yuk," she says.

Marsh loves his sister, feels closer to her than anyone else in the world, but he has to admit to being frequently confused by her. He doesn't understand her problem with Barton.

Barton Stokeley is mad about Grace. Absolutely crazy in love, he says. He's 20, and he works with horses. He is tall and muscular, with short brown hair and a limp from where a horse caught him in the kneecap with a kick. Summers he works for the state, catching wild horses. He says he doesn't know what's done to them after they're caught, but that's not any of his business. He just catches them. Right now he's financially secure. He owns his house, and he thinks it's about time he had a wife in it. He really is in love. One evening he told Marsh that he was going to fall so deeply in love with Grace, that he was bound to drag her down with him.

Grace sits up straight again, then says she has no idea what it means to be in love. "This love thing," she says, and then adds after a long pause, "it might be best to avoid it as long as possible."

Marsh nods.

"It's probably dangerous," Grace continues. She stands up and puts both hands flat on the table. "It can make you crazy. It can make you make bad decisions. It clouds the head. It's like," and she pauses, looking for the right words, settling on, "static electricity."

Marsh refuses to fall in love. He believes all girls to be perfect, and he doesn't want to spoil them with his flaws. He wants to be able to stand back and watch them all, just watch them, cherish them as the perfect angels they are. No one knows anything about this, not even Grace, and Grace knows almost everything about him.

Grace starts to clear the table. She tells Marsh to get ready. It's getting late, she says, and they don't have time to waste. They're often late for school, sometimes by as much as a half-hour. Grace says it's because they waste too much time in the morning. "Go on," she says, "brush your teeth. Comb your hair. Hurry. I'll start the car."

Marsh goes upstairs. He combs his hair, but he doesn't brush his teeth. He grimaces and looks at his teeth in the mirror. They're perfectly clean. He doesn't see the point of brushing all the time. He starts downstairs.

He pauses on the fifth step to look at the framed portrait of the family, all smiling against a background of fake sky. Marsh was six when the photograph was taken, and he finds it hard to believe he ever looked like that. His ears seem unnaturally large. He doesn't stay long. The picture depresses him. The empty space where his mother should be is obvious to him.

Grace is giving the dishes a quick rinse. She'll come back and give them a real wash later, after school, when she has more time.

Outside the car is running, warming up. It is cold outside, temperature hovering just above zero for the third day straight. It is too cold for new snow, and that's a good thing. There's already a foot of snow out there from two weeks ago.

"Get your coat on," Grace says. "Hurry. We don't have time to mope."

Marsh doesn't think he is moping. He wants to help Grace somehow, do some sort of chore, but Grace won't let him. She does all the chores. This makes Marsh feel a little useless. They don't even have a dog he could walk or fish he could feed. Marsh wishes that, maybe even just once, that Grace would ask for some help, but he knows this will never happen. Grace likes to do everything. She says it makes her feel more real.

Marsh goes to the living room and puts on his bright blue parka. He brings Grace her coat, a charcoal gray wool coat with ivory buttons. The coat was a Christmas gift from an aunt two years ago. Privately, Grace says she can't stand the aunt, but loves the coat.

Grace shakes water from her hands, then takes the coat from Marsh. "Don't you have any books?" she asks.

Marsh shakes his head.

"Are we ready to go?"

Marsh nods.

"I'm forgetting something," Grace says. She pats her coat pockets, then looks inside her purse.

Marsh already knows what the problem is: Grace has started the car and locked the keys inside. This is not the first time she has done this. Marsh knows she will realize the problem any moment, but doesn't know how she will react.

Grace slams her fist against the car. "Damn!" she says. "Damn." She kicks the door. "Damn," she says again.

Locking the keys in the car has almost become a ritual. This is the fifth time Grace has done this. By the time the locksmith arrives, the car will have run out of gas, and Grace and Marsh will have missed another day of school. Grace says she wants to take her education seriously, but that the world keeps setting up these absurd roadblocks. She says she has the worst luck in the world.

Marsh doesn't mind missing school. He isn't learning anything here, nothing useful. He goes back inside, takes off his coat, and returns it to the hall closet. He intends to go upstairs and read. He tries to read one book a week.

His latest favorite writer is Edgar Allen Poe. Grace has let him know that she doesn't approve of this. She says Poe is too creepy for an eleven-year-old. She says she's worried about someone so young reading about all that death and gloom. "Isn't there enough death in the world?" she asked him once. "You don't have to read about it all the time."

Marsh doesn't care. He likes the stories and doesn't see any problem. He knows this stuff isn't real. There isn't anything real about it at all.

Grace comes back inside and asks Marsh to bring her the phone book. She looks perfectly calm. "You'd think I'd have this number memorized by now," she says. She shakes her head. Grace told Marsh that the worst part of this was not being able to do anything about it. She said it embarrassed her to be so helpless, and that she had always wanted to believe that she was self-sufficient.

Marsh brings her the phone book, already opened to the Yellow Pages, the ads for locksmiths. Grace will call Venard's, an establishment that declares its excellence of service in rural areas. They claim to be able to serve anyplace in a 30-mile radius within an hour. This is a lie. They have never been on time. Sometimes they take five or six hours. Once, they took eight. But they do come out to the ranch, and most places refuse to do that, especially in winter.

It's a hard drive to and from the ranch, which really isn't a ranch at all. It's only 24 acres. Marsh's father says it's too much land. He wants to sell most of it. "We've got no use for that land," he said. The land is his from an inheritance. It's been in the family for close to 100 years. "The problem is with the taxes," he continued. "They tax the land even if you've got no use for it."

Two years ago, he experimented with the idea of renting lots. he rented a quarter-acre to two bikers. Nuts and Rex were their names. Rex was the woman. They weren't officially married, but they acted that way. The rental agreement didn't work out.

Nuts and Rex had friends, loud friends on loud motorcycles who ripped through the ranch at any hour, throwing beer cans everywhere. It all came to a point with the dog.

Nuts and Rex owned a dog, a big, ugly mutt that hardly ever moved. One morning, Marsh woke to the sound of howling in the yard. He looked outside and saw Nuts beating the dog with the thin end of a baseball bat. The dog didn't move. It didn't even try to protect itself.

Nuts was shouting at the dog, "Get up! Get up you stupid fucker!"

Rex was standing back from the whole thing, smoking a cigarette.

Marsh couldn't move. He wanted to do something, but he couldn't move. He shut his eyes and tried to clear his head. He started to pound on the glass, waking his father and Grace.

"Those fuckers," his father said. "Those stupid cruel fuckers." He put on a robe and went outside.

Marsh watched from the window. His father was shouting at Nuts, but it wasn't having any effect. Nuts was shaking his head.

The Marsh's father punched Nuts, hard. Nuts staggered backwards. He tried to swing the bat but missed. Marsh's father grabbed Nuts's arm and took the bat from him. He threw it away. It was like in a movie. Marsh's father punched Nuts again, over and over. Nuts fell to the ground. Marsh's father said something, then turned and went back inside.

Marsh went downstairs. Grace was making breakfast.

"When you grow up," she said, "try not to be like that, okay? Promise?"

Marsh nodded, even though he wasn't sure if Grace meant like their father or like Nuts.

Their father came into the kitchen. "Don't look at me like that," he said to Grace. "I didn't do anything wrong. I did what had to be done. That's the only language that type understands." He sat down. "You'll understand this when you're older. Not everyone is a sensitive caring type.

Not everyone responds to gentle persuasion. Get used to it." He stood up again, and he looked like he might say something, but didn't. He left the room.

"That's the way men solve problems, isn't it?" Grace asked. "That's the only thing they understand, isn't it?"

Marsh had no response.

After that, their father decided that he would only sell the land, and only to respectable people. Nuts and Rex drove off that morning and never showed up again. They set fire to their mobile home and vanished in broad daylight.

The funny thing for Marsh was how none of it seemed real. He couldn't believe any of it was happening when it happened, and he still finds it hard to believe anything happened at all. He put that scene in the place in his head where memories went to turn into something else.

Marsh is in his bedroom reading when Grace comes upstairs. He is wearing his boots in bed, and Grace tells him to take them off immediately. He does.

"They said one hour," she says, "but I just don't believe them anymore. I called Barton. He's coming over."

Marsh nods.

"I knew you'd like that." She looks up at the ceiling, and Marsh instinctively looks at the same spot, but finds nothing there.

"I'm so stupid," Grace says. "I think I made a mistake, a bad mistake. I don't think I should've called him. He'll get the wrong idea. He'll think it's some sort of declaration of undying love, but it isn't. I don't know why I called him. I'm not in any mood to deal with." She pauses. "You don't want to hear this. I'm sorry."

There is a long silence.

"Sometimes," Grace says, "I want to know what goes on in your head. Sometimes I think I know, but other times, I look at you and I can't tell anything.

"I think one day you're going to start talking," she continues, "and you're not going to stop. People are going to have to tell you to shut up. That's what I think."

Marsh shakes his head. He knows this will never happen.

"If you could talk, you could tell me what to do about Barton. I think you know more about these things than I do. He wants to marry me. That's all he talks about.

"When I tell him I'm not ready for marriage, he thinks it's just a stalling device. He's going to want an answer soon."

Marsh can't see why Grace has any doubts about Barton. Marsh has been impressed by Barton for months, ever since June, when Barton arrived to take Grace to a movie. He was carrying an umbrella and a bouquet of wildflowers. He handed the flowers to Grace, then turned to Marsh. "Are you a Taoist or a Confucianist?" he asked.

Marsh shook his head. He had no idea what Barton was talking about.

"Watch this," Barton said. He handed Marsh the umbrella. "Feel this," he said.

It was an umbrella like any other, black nylon with a wooden handle.

"It's a normal umbrella, right?"

Marsh nodded.

"Now watch," Barton said. He took the umbrella back from Marsh, then tossed it in the air. It never came down. "Feel my sleeves," he said. "It's gone. It's nowhere. Umbrellas don't just vanish, right?"

Marsh was amazed. He didn't think he was so easily tricked, but he didn't mind. He smiled. He was thrilled.

"Now, a Confucianist," Barton said, "a Confucianist knows umbrellas, and he knows umbrellas don't disappear. This is not the nature of the umbrella. He has to find out where the umbrella went, and he won't stop

asking questions until he finds out. His world won't be the same until he knows all the answers."

"Stop it, Barton," Grace said. "You're confusing him."

"You're not confused, are you?"

Marsh shook his head, even though he was confused.

"Now a Taoist, a Taoist sees the same thing, and he's amazed. He just accepts that the umbrella is gone and starts over from there. He'd be happy if the umbrella was there or not. Now," Barton said, "watch this." He clapped his hands, lifted his arms, and the umbrella was there again. "All I'm trying to say is, I hope you're not a Confucianist. You're not, are you?"

Marsh shook his head. He wasn't sure what it all meant, but he knew he was a Taoist.

"Good," Barton said. "Very good." And then he left with Grace.

"I'm not ready to give an answer," Grace says, "not yet. I haven't even finished high school. I need more life experience. I'd like to go to college, learn real things. I'd like to see Paris. Barton wouldn't take me to Paris. He'd settle for Yellowstone. I'd like to meet exciting people. Barton would settle for a cabin in the woods. It's not that I mind making

compromises, God knows I've been making them all my life, it's that he's already made all the decisions about all of my compromises for me. Does any of this make sense? Do you know what I'm talking about?"

Marsh shakes his head.

"I wish I knew what was going on inside your head. It must be wonderful."

Marsh shrugs.

"I bring this on myself, I guess," Grace says. "I guess I deserve this. I invite him over even though I don't want to see him. I let him get carried away. I don't do anything about it." She sighs. "Yuk," she says. "I think I'm a little crazy. It think there's something wrong with me. I don't know what I want, I don't know why I do what I do, I don't know anything. It's a hard way to live." She shakes her head. "This is all gibberish. You don't understand any of this, do you?"

Marsh shakes his head. What else is there to do? He can't tell in her voice if she means what she is saying, and that's scary. Maybe she is a little crazy. He loves his sister, but that doesn't mean he can't be afraid of her.

"I wish you were the type of brother who gave advice, but you aren't. That doesn't mean I don't love you. It's just that I wish I could get a little more from you. If you were older, you could be a role model, but you

aren't and there's nothing we can do about that." She pauses. "I'm babbling. I'm sorry. You must think I'm stupid. I'll let you read. You don't need to hear any of this." She takes a deep breath. "Remember," she says, "no matter what happens, I love you. Just remember that, okay?"

Marsh nods. He feels lucky about not being able to talk, because he can't think of anything to say.

Grace leaves.

Marsh thinks that if he could talk, his brain would have no problem in finding the magic sentence, the sentence that could fix everything, the sentence that would help Grace answer all her questions about Barton, but because he can't talk, his brain doesn't even try to find the words.

* * * * *

Marsh is watching Grace from the stairs. She is standing by the window, probably staring at the car, probably blaming the car for everything. Before this, she was pacing, and before that, she vacuumed. She never stopped moving.

Marsh doesn't know what to expect because he can't tell what she's thinking. If she has a plan, Marsh has no idea what it is. He knows that if she does do anything, it will be drastic, a statement that means something, a message that cannot be misinterpreted, something irreversible. But Marsh has no idea as to what that message would be.

Grace tenses, as if she sees something, and Marsh assumes it is Barton. Marsh goes to his father's bedroom to watch Barton's arrival from the upstairs window.

Barton is riding a white horse, holding the reins of a second horse in his hands. This is almost exactly what Marsh expected. Barton said one day he would throw Grace on a horse and take her away from all this, take her to town, where they would be married by a justice of the peace. Somehow, Marsh knew it would be today.

Barton dismounts. The horses stand still and silent in the cold and wind. He walks toward the door. Marsh watches his right leg, the leg with the plastic kneecap.

Barton knocks on the door, three solid raps. Marsh waits a few minutes, letting Grace and Barton have some privacy, then goes back to the stairs to watch. He sees Grace, standing in the hall, pointing their father's shotgun at Barton. Marsh does not know if this is entirely a surprise. In

his head, Marsh sees Barton take the gun from Grace and make it disappear, but this does not happen.

"You invited me," Barton says. "This is what you want. You know this is what you want."

"Get out of here," Grace says. "Please. Go home."

"Grace, you know I love you. You know you love me. Don't think I'm scared. I'm not scared. I love you."

Marsh wishes Barton could be more persuasive, make a better argument.

"Get out!" Grace screams. She fires a shell through the ceiling. Plaster comes down in heavy clumps. The kick of the shotgun knocks Grace flat on her back.

Barton drops to his knees. Marsh comes down two steps, but knows better than to go any further. He knows he can't do anything. Whatever happens, this is all Grace.

"Grace," Barton says. Just that.

Marsh moves down one more step.

"Grace," Barton says again.

Grace gets up. "Twenty," she says, very quietly. Nineteen. Eighteen."

Marsh knows immediately what the numbers mean: Grace is going to give Barton 20. Grace is doing this because she does not want to believe herself capable of violence.

Barton reaches into his pocket and pulls out a jewelry box containing a diamond ring. Marsh can see that Barton does not expect the worst, that no part of him expects the worst. Barton still sees the ending, the ride off across the field.

"Twelve," Grace says. "Eleven." Her voice is getting louder.

Marsh has a strange sensation of heat in his hands, in his cheeks, through his whole body. He wonders if Grace feels the same thing.

Barton stands up. He takes a step toward Grace. "This is love," he says. "Believe me this is love."

"Seven," Grace says. "Six."

Marsh realizes he is going to have to do something. Barton obviously doesn't know what the numbers mean. He has no idea how serious Grace is.

Barton takes another step toward Grace, then another. He is two steps from Grace, and this is too close. She fires.

Marsh sees it, but it doesn't look real. Barton's body is too perfectly arched, like stuntman or a diver.

The horses run off. Marsh turns his attention to them, watches them run off across the empty fields.

Marsh goes to Grace, and she wraps her arms around him. He wants to say something, but is afraid that his voice would just ruin the words.

The shotgun sits on the floor. The smell of shot fills the air.

Grace rocks back and forth, holding Marsh.

Marsh knows now, is completely sure, that he is nothing like his sister. He lets her hold him, then he puts his arms around her. The cold wind circles around them. Marsh knows exactly how different he is from this woman he loves, and in that very moment, is sure that Grace knows the exact same thing.

CAR TROUBLE

Cath says she doesn't feel like walking. She asks me if I wouldn't mind driving her to her class, then maybe, if I waited for her, she'd treat me to dessert and coffee at Carlotta's. I tell her I've got work to do, that I don't really have time, but she gives me a look, and she makes me feel like I've ruined everything. "Okay," I say, "sure. Why not?"

Cath says I can take my work along. "It would give you something to do while waiting," she adds, and now she looks unnaturally overjoyed. She looks so happy, it makes me feel uncomfortable.

Cath is learning how to read. She's 21, and she says she's sick of being so stupid.

She packs a notebook and a dozen ballpoint pens into her backpack. She asks if I think she looks like a student.

"Like a valedictorian," I say, then immediately wonder if this word is too literary for her, if it looks like I'm just showing off.

She doesn't respond, and I can't tell if that's a good or bad sign. She opens a desk drawer and removes a keychain with a four-leaf clover

encased in plastic. She says something, but so quietly I can't hear. I don't pry. She drops the keychain into her backpack. "I'm ready," she says, this time louder. She's not just smiling, she's beaming. I have never seen her this happy.

The campus is a ten-minute drive away, and she talks the whole way, never letting me have an opportunity to answer any of her questions or respond to any of her statements. "This is perfect weather," she says. "This is like God showing me His approval. I can't believe I'm finally doing this. Can you believe it? This is amazing. My father would be so proud, but I'm not going to tell him about this. Do you think I should tell him? I think it would be better if it just came as a surprise, like maybe I could write him a Christmas card next Christmas, let him find out that way, with the evidence right there in his hands. I think he'd like that."

I take a seat outside her classroom, in a student's desk. The desk makes me feel old. I graduated two year ago and thought I was through with desks. I want to work, but I can't find a comfortable position.

After ten minutes, I just give up. I stand up and start pacing. I want to go for a walk, but I can't. If Cath's class lets out early and she finds me gone, she'll accuse me of deserting her. She'll cry. Cath is the type that needs constant emotional reinforcement. I guess it comes from not being

able to read, but I'm not sure I understand the specifics of the connection. I'm not a psychologist. I manage a restaurant.

A man approaches me, offers me a cigarette. I point out the "No Smoking" sign on the wall behind us. "Fuck signs," he says, but puts his cigarette away. He apologizes for swearing. "I'm a little edgy," he says. "My girlfriend's in there" He gestures with his thumb toward the same classroom where Cath went in. "You're in the same boat, right?"

"Yes," I say, then feel a little awkward, as if I've just violated Cath's privacy.

"Hard boat to be in," he says. "Better than some others, I bet."

"Guess so," I say. I want the man to say something important, take a step beyond small talk, but realize I'm glad the conversation is staying small. I don't think I'm in the mood for essential discussion. I'm too tired, too nervous, too bored, too cluttered to engage in any sort of real conversation. I've got a restaurant budget in the front of my mind and Cath in the back.

"I didn't think Jeannie would ever learn to read," the man says. "And I don't mean that like she's too dumb for it, just that there hasn't been much call for it." He laughs, a high clucking sound. "It hasn't been an essential part of our relationship," he says, leaning in, "if you know what I

mean." He blushes. "Jesus, I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. I'm a pig."

"It's nothing," I say, wondering if this is solace enough and wondering how I was forced into a position of offering solace. "Don't worry about it."

"Don't tell Jeannie I said anything, okay?"

"Cross my heart," I say, then add, "Scout's honor."

"You know anything about cars?"

"A bit," I say. "Not much." I have no idea where the conversation is heading.

"This was three weeks ago," he says. "We were driving to Virtue, near Steadville, to visit my brother Ken and his new wife, his third. This time, he said, it was going to last. He rushed into those other two." He paused, as if to give me time to follow. He made eye contact and held it, establishing a hook.

"There was something wrong with the car," he continued, "and we kept having to pull over every 15 minutes or so to wait for the engine to cool down. Jeannie was complaining. She wanted me to turn back, call Ken and tell him we couldn't make it."

I hope this doesn't turn into a confessional. I'm not prepared to deal with tales of violence or tales of woe. I want to interrupt, but he just keeps

talking. I look at Cath's classroom door, hoping for her to appear, hoping for an excuse to leave.

"No,' I said, 'we'll make it. We just have to make it to a gas station and get some coolant.' I was trying to sound like I knew what was wrong with the car, but Jeannie, she saw right through it.

"Jeannie never had any faith in the car. She doesn't have faith in many things. I patted the dashboard and said, 'C'mon, baby, you can make it. Don't die now.'

"Jeannie just looked at me and said, 'We're gonna end up in the middle of shit nowhere with a dead car if we don't turn back.' She didn't say it like she was angry. She said it flat, like it was the obvious truth. She's like that, acts like she knows the truth and nobody else does. It makes me mad sometimes, but mostly I try to let it glide. I'm not much for fighting or arguing."

I think the story is about to take a turn for the worse, that this is about one of those exceptions, one of those times he didn't let it glide. I ask him if he thinks he should be telling me this, if he doesn't think it's too personal. "You don't know me," I add. "I'm a complete stranger."

He puts a hand on my shoulder. "But I trust you," he says, then continues his story. "The car was a '65 Mustang I bought mostly restored from these hippies. It was a good car. Hardly ever gave me any problems.

It drank a lot of gas, but it ran good and solid most of the time. It even looked real good, no rust on it anywhere. People would come up to me and tell me what a great car I had.

"But, Jeannie, Jeannie of the little faith, says, 'We should buy a new car. Something completely new, not just another used one. Something that won't keep falling apart.'"

I side with Jeannie, but I don't say anything.

"'This car's fine,' I said, and I was getting a little mad. She kept talking about the car like it was obvious it should've been junked years ago. I kept myself calm, and I tell you, that took real effort. 'This car's got at least another two years left in her.'

'Two shitty years,' Jeannie said, and if it was anyone else, I would've stopped the car and made her leave, but it was Jeannie, and I love her. I don't know why. I just do. You're a guy. You understand. I think maybe it's her eyes. It might be that simple. She has these really pretty blue eyes."

"So does Cath," I say, and immediately wish I hadn't. I didn't want to reveal her name or become an active participant in this man's story.

"Blue eyes," he repeated. "Anyway, I started talking to the car. 'You're just having a bad night. Isn't that right, baby?'

'Every night's a bad night in this piece of shit. We need a new car. We could get one of those little Japanese cars that don't use a lot of gas.

They're getting cheaper." He had raised his voice a little higher, using a different voice for Jeannie.

"I looked at her," he said, dropping back into his own voice, "and the way she looked, I could tell she was dead serious. 'Look, honey, this car's fine. It needs a little coolant, that's all.'

"Jeannie shook her head. She said she was giving up trying to tell me anything. Sometimes Jeannie treats me like I'm a complete idiot, but I try not to care. It's nothing personal. I know and she knows there are things I'm good at that she couldn't do worth shit." He apologizes for swearing again, then continues his story. "I'm the one who has the job and brings home the money she loves to spend. I finished high school--a lot more than she ever did. When she treats me like an idiot, I know better. I ignore it. I let her get it out of her system. Jesus," he says, "I must sound like the biggest jerk. Really, I'm not. I mean, maybe sometimes I can be, but that's the exception, not the rule. I'm not that mean."

I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything.

"Shit," he says. "You're a guy. You know the way it goes. We're not supposed to be perfect." He takes a deep breath, then says, "So, anyway, the car started sputtering again. I pulled it over and popped the hood. We just sat there and let all the engine smoke fade away."

Steam, I want to say. It probably wasn't smoke. It was steam. But I keep quiet.

"When all the smoking was done, I fanned the engine with my cap. I slammed the hood shut. If you didn't slam it, it would just pop up sometimes. I got back in the car and started her up.

"It was a few minutes before Jeannie said anything. You know what she says?" he asks, then answers before I have a chance to say anything.

"Don't tell your brother I can't read. He'll laugh at me.'

"I let the line sit there for a few seconds, then I say, 'He won't laugh. He's not like that.'"

I look over at the clock on the wall, but try not to make it look obvious.

"Jeannie can't read at all," he says. "I have to read menus for her when we go to restaurants. And we go to restaurants a lot too because Jeannie can't cook too well. If we didn't eat out, we'd eat scrambled eggs and toast all the time. I think that's all she knows how to make, and she doesn't even make them right. She makes the eggs runny. I hate sounding like a snob, but I hate runny eggs." He laughs.

I think about Cath. She is a wonderful cook, surprisingly good. She has a library of elaborate recipes in her head. She refuses to accept

compliments for her cooking. If I say anything, she'll blush and say, "It's nothing."

"Then Jeannie turns all serious and says, 'I want to learn how to read. Can you teach me?'

"This was the first I'd ever heard of this. I'll admit I was a little surprised, but I didn't want to let her see this. 'Sure,' I said. 'It's easy.'

"I always wanted to learn. I just never had the time."

I think the story has reached some sort of punchline, but he just keeps going.

"The car started sputtering again, and I had to pull her over.

"We just stopped five minutes ago,' Jeannie said.

"I popped the hood, and we waited for the smoke to stop.

"This car's a piece of shit,' she said. She was getting all fidgety in her seat, like even the seats were bad.

"It's a good car. Just wait till we get to a gas station. I'll get some coolant. Everything'll be fine, you'll see.'

"We need a new car.'" He stops trying to do Jeannie's voice. His voice gets a notch louder.

I look over at the classroom door. The door is solid wood, no window to look in.

"We don't need a new car. This one's fine. This one's perfect.'

"'We need a new car.' She wasn't even looking at me anymore. She was looking out the window."

I think that Cath should be here, not me. Cath's a better listener.

"'Look,' I said, 'even if we needed a new car, which we don't, we couldn't afford it anyway.'"

"Jeannie turns back to me and says, 'I could get a job.'" He shakes his head, and takes a long pause, remembering the scene in his own mind.

"'The only kind of job you could get is the kind I wouldn't want you having, baby.' The second I said this, Jeannie's eyes just turned evil on me. She raised her hand, and I thought she was going to slap me. It was a weird feeling, being that close to a fight, but stopping just short."

I can feel the story turning to confession. I can see an act of violence in the horizon. I flinch.

"I know it was a shitty thing to say, but I was being honest. I hate to say this, but Jeannie's not smart enough for real work. Not everybody's meant for real work. Some people are here just to look good. That's their main purpose in life. That's God's plan for them. Jeannie's one of those people, but she'd never admit it. Some people aren't all the way honest with themselves, you know the type."

I know he doesn't mean anything by it, but I have a feeling that he means me. I want to tell him to fuck off, but I don't say anything.

"Jeannie didn't talk for a long time after that, and when she did, it was just to herself. She talked just loud enough for me to hear talking but not words. I could tell she was doing this just to make me mad." He slaps his forehead. "I'm an asshole," he says.

I open my mouth to say something, but no words come to mind. I make a nonsense syllable, something like, "uh" or "eh."

"So, we finally make it to a gas station in Harper."

None of these town names trigger even the slightest memory, not Virtue, not Steadville, not Harper. I'm not much for maps or directions.

"The guy there said he could fix the car, but it would take a few days and a few hundred dollars. I told him we didn't have either. He said if we wanted, we could borrow his old car for the weekend, only we had to give him \$50 for it. He was pointing at this old Buick, one of those monsters from the seventies, shit brown and ugly. 'Fifty dollars,' I said, 'isn't that kind of steep?'

"Before he could answer, maybe offer a better price, Jeannie said, 'Don't be cheap. Pay the man.'"

He laughs, as if there's some funny detail to the story, something he remembers but isn't telling. I feel guilty for wanting to know what he's thinking. I feel greedy.

"I gave the guy \$50. I hated being out all that cash at once. I thought about what would happen if this car sucked. We'd get stuck somewhere, and I wouldn't have any money. I called Ken from the pay phone and told him that me and Jeannie would be late. I didn't want to let him know it was car trouble, because that he would've laughed at. He's rich. He owns three cars. One's a BMW. He would've laughed and asked me when I was getting a new car. I couldn't deal with that, not with Jeannie giving me the same shit.

"Jeannie got our things from the car and packed them all into the Buick's back seat. I checked the tires, then filled the tank. The guy said he's lop \$5 off the cost of a fill-up. The Buick had rust holes everywhere, and I had a feeling that all the gas was just leaking out of some hole in the tank and back into the pump. I knew we were getting ripped off, but I couldn't figure out just how."

He puts his hand back on my shoulder and applies some slight pressure, a move that confuses me. I knew a bartender who did the same thing. It ended up getting him into a fight. He left town after that.

"Jeannie thanked the guy, and we pulled out into the string. The thing had a bad transmission problem. That's what I noticed first. I could tell by the way it shook whenever I accelerated. I told Jeannie we got ripped off, but she acted like she didn't hear a word. She still wasn't

talking. I thought about apologizing, but I didn't. That wouldn't have been honest. I still didn't see how she could be so mad at me for being honest. I tried turning on the radio, but it didn't work. No sound at all, not even static. Jeannie kept up her mumbling, only now she kept throwing in the words, 'Fuck it.'

"She opened the glove compartment and found some cigarettes, a 1,000-year-old pack of Camels. She rolled down the window and smoked one, knocking the ashes into the road and blowing her smoke out the window. She only smoked it halfway, then flicked it out the window. I could see it hit the road from the rear-view. The way she was sitting, with her legs tight together and her back turned to me, I could tell she was still mad at me. She didn't look like she'd every forgive me. I was hoping it would pass before we got to Ken's."

He takes his hand from my shoulder. I feel immediate relief.

"Around Grandville, the Buick started having big problems. It started shaking so bad, I had to pull it over. I popped the hood and went to see if there was anything I could do, but I've never known a lot about cars, so it was pointless. Jeannie got out of the car. She sat on the trunk. She still wasn't talking. I thought I could rub it in, tell her how I knew we were getting ripped off, but I knew that would just make everything worse. We sat there for about an hour in complete silence. No cars drove by. There

wasn't any sound at all, not even birds or crickets. Tall grass surrounded us, miles in every direction. There was no wind at all, and everything stood completely still. The air was hot. The sun going down hadn't done any good. It was about 90, maybe a little more. I took off my shirt. I was sweating right through it. Jeannie talked again, and the sound of her voice made me happy, even though all she did was tell me to put my shirt back on. She said I looked like a drunk."

I nod, as if I see the point to all this, as if I understand what he's getting at. I'm not an idiot, but sometimes I just can't see any point to other people's stories. My grandfather used to tell me stories, but I never saw a point to any of them. I remember only one of his sayings: "The best legs always belong to the worst faces. God is cruel sometimes. Learn to accept that, and you'll be happy."

"Finally, a state trooper drove by. He stopped and called us a tow truck. After he left, Jeannie spoke again. She told me I should have given the trooper a tip. 'You don't tip those people,' I said. 'That's their job.'

"The tow truck came in 20 minutes. Jeannie and I sat up front with the driver, an old man who smelled so bad Jeannie had to take her breaths outside the window. The man smelled like animals. When he started talking about the Grandville horse races, I could identify the smell exactly. Stables.

"The man said his son had a horse racing for the first time. He said it was a good horse, and the smart money was on it. I asked for the horse's name. 'Chinese Dinner,' the guy said. He started laughing so hard, I thought he might take the truck right off the road.

"I couldn't tell if he was being honest or just being a proud father. I tried to figure how old his son might be. I guessed with father so old, the kid was probably in his thirties. I didn't know if the kid owned the horse or if he was a jockey. I thought 30 was pretty old for a first-time jockey."

"Ancient," I say, just for a break from the man's voice.

"How old was Willie Shoemaker?" he asked, shook his head, then said, "Anyway, we got to the gas station, and we sat in the office area while the guy looked at it with some long-haired high school kid in a heavy-metal T-shirt who just poked at things and agreed with everything the old man said. I watched from the window, just standing as close to the fan as I could.

"The old guy came back after 20 minutes and said, 'That car's dead. Miracle you made it far as you did. Transmission's held together by bobby pins, duct tape, and super glue. I can't see as there's any point to even thinking about repair. Best just to cut your losses. Best I can do is offer you some money for scrap, say \$200, then Mike there can drive you people home to wherever you come from.'

"I was going to tell him it wasn't even our car, but Jeannie gave me this kick, and I knew I had to shut up."

I smiled and thought about doing the same.

"Jeannie looks the guy straight in the eye and says, 'Make it \$300 and you got a deal.'

"The guy smiled and agreed, just like that. We got our things from the Buick and tossed them in the back of Mike's truck. The man had a perfect smile. He had all his teeth, and they were all white. I could tell they were real. He shook my hand and said, 'You got a good wife.'

"I didn't want to tell him that me and Jeannie weren't married. It didn't seem right to tell him that.

"Jeannie walked over to me and kissed me. She wasn't mad anymore."

I can see the story winding down, his voice lowers, and he slows down his pace. I'm glad the story resolved itself without violence.

"Jeannie leaned over and whispered in my ear, 'If that sonofabitch tries suing us about the Buick, we'll just sue his ass off. Fraud. Pain and suffering. Reckless Endangerment. Besides it was fair trade for the Mustang, right?' She giggled, a sound I never heard from her before. She kissed me again.

"I felt a little weird about losing the Mustang, just giving it up like that, but Jeannie helped me get over it. She had this idea. We got home in two hours, and she made me call Ken right away. He said we were so late that he was getting worried. He said he was going to call the cops. I told him we wouldn't be coming over at all. I told him it was car trouble. He laughed, like I knew he would, then asked when I was getting a new car. 'Tomorrow,' I said."

I could see the punchline.

"So, the next day, we got together all the crazy money, the cash in the cookie jar, the cash in the freezer, every extra cent we had, and with the money we got from the Buick, put a down payment on this silver-gray Toyota, tape deck, everything." He grabs me by the shoulder and leads me to the window. He points out the car. "It's going to be tight for me and Jeannie, moneywise, for awhile, but just look at that car. I think me and Jeannie both agree it's worth it. It's such a damn nice car."

He steps back, and I expect him to bow. He looks at me anxiously, waiting for my approval, and I give it to him. "Damn nice car," I say.

He takes his keys from his pocket. "Want a test drive?" he asks.

"Can't," I say. "I have to wait."

"Guess I should wait too," he says, then looks down at the floor, as if he's just suffered an enormous defeat.

"Maybe next week."

The classroom door opens, and a woman approaches us. Jeannie, I assume. "Hey ya, hon," the man says, and they kiss. "How was class?"

"We didn't do anything. We told stories about ourselves. It was boring. Some guy talked for ten minutes about his father. I thought I was going to die."

Cath appears suddenly. I hadn't noticed her leave the room or approach. I'm staring at Jeannie. She's beautiful, unbelievably so. She looks like she could be famous.

"Ready to go?" Cath asks, and she tugs at my arm.

"Yeah," I say and feel guilty for continuing to stare.

Cath keep tugging at my arm, and I turn to face her. She's scowling, and I know she has some story about how awful class was. I know I'm going to hear it. Some days, I guess, God just sets up to make you a listener.

"That girl's a liar," Cath says, as we leave the building. "She can read. She's lying when she says she can't."

"How can you tell?"

"It's just obvious. If you were there, you could tell."

I ask Cath why anyone would lie about being illiterate. "What's there to gain from it?"

"I'm not sure yet. Some people are just crazy like that. I think she's obsessive-compulsive." She nods, proud of her diagnosis.

At Carlotta's, Cath asks to change the subject. She says she doesn't want to go to class anymore, at least not that one. "There's a class at the high school. Maybe I'll go there."

I tell her she shouldn't give up so soon and then realize the insincerity in my voice. I sound like a coach offering vain support to a team that's already lost the game.

Cath puts her hand on mine. "Maybe you can teach me," she says, and grins.

I shake my head. "I'm not a teacher," I say. "I can't teach you." I think about Jeannie asking the same question. I turn away, look out the window.

Cath says something, but her voice blurs. I try to focus on the moon, a thin crescent tonight, hanging bluntly over everything. Cath removes her hand from mine, and I turn to face her again. "I'm sorry," I say, but I'm not sure why I'm apologizing. I just know it's a necessary gesture.

"It's okay," Cath says. "You're forgiven."

I look out the window again. If it's bad not to know why you're apologizing, I think, then it must be worse to be forgiven for the same

reason. The thought is not happy, but I can't stop grinning. I turn to Cath again, and I try to make myself look as serious as possible and say,

"So, tell me again, why would someone lie about being illiterate?"

"You wouldn't understand," Cath says. "You'll never understand."

"Try me," I say, and I wonder if it sounds too much like a challenge.

THE DESERT BETWEEN CHICAGO AND MADISON

Caleb's mother parked the car sloppily, straddling it over the yellow line. Caleb saw this and wanted to say something, but he decided against it. He was only 11, but he was smart enough to know when it was better not to say anything at all. He had been quiet all morning.

Jacob, Caleb's little brother, was in the back seat, talking to himself. "I'm tall," he said. "I'm so tall, I can step on buildings. I'm so tall, I can eat buildings. I could walk on buildings, and when I get hungry, I can eat them." Jacob was six. He was sitting on a suitcase. Caleb wished Jacob would shut up.

Caleb's mother opened her purse and pulled out the bus tickets. She handed one to Caleb, then, using a safety pin, fastened the second to Jacob's lapel. The boys were both wearing Sunday suits. Caleb's was blue; his brother's was brown.

Their mother took two \$5 bills and put one in Caleb's left sock and one in his right. "This is yours," she said, touching him on his right leg, "and this is Jacob's. Understand?"

Caleb nodded. Everything was so serious.

"This is emergency money. Everything else you need, your father will give you. Do not waste this on candy or gum or comic books. Understand?"

Caleb nodded again.

"That's how tall I am. I'm the giant. I'm the biggest giant in the world."

"You have sandwiches and snacks in your bags. You shouldn't need anything else," Caleb's mother said. She took off her sunglasses and dropped them in her purse. She took a comb from her purse and began combing Caleb's hair. She kept opening her mouth and making small sounds, as if she were about to say something, but no words came out. She started crying.

Caleb didn't know what to do. "It's okay," he said. "It's only a few weeks. It's nothing."

Jacob stopped talking. He was dead silent in the back seat.

"I'm sorry," their mother said. She put a hand on Caleb's shoulder. "Be good. You're responsible now. You're the older brother."

Caleb nodded. Ten minutes ago, he wasn't nervous at all. Now he was. He didn't let it show. He looked back at his brother.

"Make sure he takes his medication. Don't let him forget," Caleb's mother said. "Do you have your pills?" she asked Jacob.

Jacob tapped his pocket, and the pills made a sound like a rattle.

"Good."

The Greyhound pulled into the station. A large cart stacked with suitcases was pulled out of the station. People got off the bus, walked around, stretched, smoked cigarettes.

Caleb opened his door and got out. He opened his brother's door. "C'mon, Jacob," he said, "hurry up. Our bus is here."

Jacob got out. Their mother came around and picked up the suitcase. Caleb picked up the two backpacks. They were heavy, loaded with food, books, extra clothes, travel games. Caleb's backpack had the wedding present, two crystal wine glasses and a bottle of wine.

Their father was getting married again, to a German woman named Ute. Jacob and Caleb had never met Ute. They didn't even know what she looked like.

They walked to the station and dropped the suitcase off with the man behind the counter. The man smiled down at the boys. He was an old man, and Caleb could tell that the teeth were really dentures.

"I don't wanna go," Jacob said, flatly.

"You have to go. It's your father. He's getting married. He needs you there. You're the ringbearer."

"I don't care. I don't wanna go."

"Yes you do. You just don't know that yet. You'll be happy when you get there." She kissed her son on the forehead.

Caleb expected his brother to start crying. Jacob cried a lot, at least once a day. When a dog died in a movie they were watching on television, Jacob cried for two straight hours. He cried straight on until he fell asleep from crying. Caleb didn't cry anymore. He was too old for it. There's a point, he thought, where you just have to look at yourself and say no more crying. "It's okay," he told his brother. "We'll have fun."

Jacob started to spin, then dropped to the tiled floor. Everyone in the station stopped everything and looked. There was just one sound left in the air, the huffing and wheezing of the bus.

"C'mon, Jacob," Caleb said. "Don't do that. Get up."

Their mother knelt down. She put a hand under Jacob's head, and he got up, just like that. He didn't cry, he didn't resist, he didn't do anything. Caleb was amazed.

"It's only a four-hour ride," she said. "That's not very far. You can call whenever you want, but I don't think you will. You'll be having too much fun. You can ride his horses and go swimming or fishing in his lake. You'll have so much fun. Trust me. I wish I could go."

Caleb knew immediately that these were the wrong words. Jacob started crying. Caleb thought that they had gotten over the worst of it. Now he felt uncomfortable.

"You'll have so much fun," their mother said. "You'll go on hikes. Horseback rides. You like horses." She started crying again.

"I'm not going," Jacob said.

Caleb could see that Jacob was trying not to cry, that he just couldn't help it. He was shaking with the pressure.

"We have to go," Caleb said. He felt old somehow, a feeling he had never had before. "It's not about wanting to," he continued. "It's about what we have to do. It's our father. He's getting married. We have to be there."

"Yes, that's right. That's absolutely right. You have to go. Don't cry."

"I don't wanna go."

Caleb didn't want to go either, but he knew he had to. He hadn't seen his father in two years. He knew he had to go, if only to see what it felt like to have a father, even though it was only two weeks. He wanted to know how it felt to be a good son. "We have to go," he said. "It's time." He pointed up at the clock behind the counter. It was 8:11. The bus was supposed to leave at 8:17.

"Yes," their mother said. "You have to go." She wiped her nose with a Kleenex, then dropped it on the station floor. People were still looking. She took Jacob's hand.

They walked to the bus. The driver was standing outside the door, leaning against his bus. The man was unbelievably fat. Caleb thought the man was too big to fit in the seat. The driver tore off half of Caleb's ticket, then handed back the stub. Caleb thanked him.

"Don't thank me," the driver said. "I get paid for this." He laughed. He tore the ticket on Jacob's lapel. The stub remained pinned there. "This their first time?" he asked.

"First alone."

"Just make sure they know the rules," a pause, "no crying and no smoking." He laughed again.

They all entered the bus. They found seats four rows from the back.

After Jacob sat down, their mother asked Caleb to come with her, just for a minute. They left the bus, and she started talking. She spoke so quietly that Caleb had to strain to hear. "I have to warn you," she said. "This is something you should know." She was holding herself very still. "You are a child from a broken home. You probably don't know what that means yet, but this will affect you for years." She started opening and closing her hands, making a fist, then opening it, over and over.

Caleb started doing the same thing. He didn't know why.

"A broken home is a horrible thing. Your father and I, we did a horrible thing. We didn't treat love with the respect it deserved." She shut her eyes, then took a deep breath. "You probably don't understand any of this," she said, "but I have to tell you this. I don't think you'll ever be able to experience love without suspicion. All happiness you have in this world will be tainted by the failures of your father and myself."

Caleb looked down at his shoes, concentrating on a single scuff. He thought the worst part of this was understanding what his mother was talking about.

"I'm sorry. Your father and I are both very sorry. We were thinking about ourselves, and that was wrong." She looked at her watch like she had someplace else to be. "We poisoned your life and probably your brother's too. When you're old enough to know what I'm talking about, you will learn to hate us. This is something your father and I both expect. We talked about it last night."

"I don't hate you," Caleb said. "I love you." He looked up at his mother again. She was facing him, but it didn't feel like she was looking at him. "Jacob loves you too," he added. He thought this was what his mother wanted to hear.

She shook her head. "Yes," she said, "of course you do." She kissed him on the forehead, then on the cheek.

"I love you," Caleb said. It sounded awkward. He couldn't tell if she believed him or not. He wanted some evidence either way.

"Take care of your brother," she said. She stood up straight. She was a very tall woman. She put a hand on Caleb's shoulder, took it off, then on again. "You are the older brother. You are," she stopped the sentence and started another, "Be good. Be nice to your father. Be nice to Ute. She's going to be part of your family now. This may be difficult for your brother. Try and help him understand. You're the older brother. You are responsible." Her expression was very serious, almost frightening.

"Yes," Caleb said. "I know."

"Make sure he takes his medication, okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

Caleb let his mother straighten his tie. She entered the bus again, said something to the driver, then turned around, went down the three stairs and headed toward the car. She walked past Caleb without stopping. She walked all the way to the car, turned and waved. Then she entered her car and was gone.

Caleb returned to his seat. He stared directly ahead. He didn't want to look out the window. He focused on a hand-painted sign dangling from

string in the center of the bus: "DRIVER HAS RIGHT TO EJECT ANYONE ANYWHERE!" it said in bright red. Caleb imagined this, being ejected, stranded on some long stretch of empty road with Jacob, trailing their suitcase behind them, the sky growing darker, colder, and maybe the howl of wolves or coyotes in the distance. The bus started moving, and the sign began to spin wildly on its string. The same message was written on both sides.

The bus pulled out of the station and onto the road. Caleb glanced quickly out the window and saw his mother. She had stopped her car just outside the lot and was standing on the shoulder of the road, waving furiously. She was crying again. There's too much crying in this family, Caleb thought. The bus lurched sharply with each gear shift.

Caleb was happy to see Jacob rummaging through his backpack. If he looked out the window, he might start crying.

Jacob's backpack was filled with healthy foods: juices, cheese sandwiches, apples, a Thermos of milk. He pulled out a magnetic checkerboard, a small sheet of metal with button-sized checkers.

Caleb leaned back in his seat. He shut his eyes. He knew there was no desert between Madison and Chicago, no coyotes, nothing really dangerous, but he couldn't stop himself from imagining all this an endless

desert. The only blips in the horizon were cacti, and the only movement was the circling of vultures.

"Wanna play checkers?" Jacob asked.

Caleb opened his eyes and looked at his brother. He looked down at the checkerboard between them. Jacob had set everything up already.

"No," Caleb said, "not yet. Maybe later."

"Okay," Jacob said.

Caleb shut his eyes again. He tried to remember what his mother had told him, but the words were already starting to blur. His stomach hurt.

Jacob tapped him on the shoulder. Caleb flinched.

"What's he like?" Jacob asked.

"Same as last time," Caleb answered. "Just a little older."

"I don't remember the last time. Not really."

"He's tall. He's very tall. He's taller than Mom. And he's got a tan from being out in the sun all the time. He has long hair, hair down to his shoulders."

"Jacob nodded. He took an apple from his bag.

"He's very funny. He tells lots of jokes. He's always making jokes."

Jacob took a bite from the apple. The apple was so bright, it didn't look real.

Caleb looked forward again. The woman in the seat ahead of him was wearing a Walkman. She had it turned up so loud that Caleb could hear the music clearly.

No one on the bus was talking. Most people were trying to sleep. Some were reading. The only other kid on the bus was playing with a Gameboy.

Caleb looked down at the checkerboard. He thought about how weird it was being the older brother. He had taught Jacob how to play checkers, and now that was all that he wanted to do.

Jacob finished his apple and asked where to put the core.

"I don't know. Maybe there's a garbage can in the bathroom."

When Jacob left, Caleb started to think about their mother. He worried about her sometimes. She got too serious sometimes. It can't be fun to be her, he thought.

Jacob returned empty-handed. He said there was no garbage can, so he put the apple core in the toilet, instead.

Caleb wondered if this was reason enough for the bus driver to eject them.

"Wanna play checkers now?"

"Okay," Caleb said. "I guess so."

"I'm red, and you're black. Red starts." He made his move.

The bus left the highway and pulled into a parking lot. "Gurnee," the driver shouted. No one moved.

Jacob started talking about their father again. "I don't remember him at all," he said. "Except for talking on the phone."

Caleb moved a piece. "He's a nice man."

Jacob moved again.

"He listens to country music," Caleb said. He double-jumped two of Jacob's pieces.

"I can't remember him and Mom ever being married." He didn't move a piece.

"I don't either," Caleb said. "Not really."

"What if I don't like him?"

"You'll like him. He's very nice."

Jacob finally moved, jumping one of Caleb's checkers.

Caleb tried to remember what it was like when their father lived with them. He couldn't remember anything important. He remembered only the dumb things, like his father showing him how to make a flame-thrower with a can of Lysol and a match or shooting arrows at a hornets' nest from the back porch. Caleb jumped another piece and had his checker kinged. The game was too easy.

"I don't wanna play anymore," Jacob said. "I'm tired."

"That's okay," Caleb said. "Take a nap. I'll wake you up when we get there."

"I'm tired, but I'm not tired enough to go to sleep."

"Read a book then."

"Maybe I will take a nap," Jacob said. He shut his eyes and was asleep almost immediately. He made a sound with each breath.

Caleb looked out the window. The landscape was getting greener with each mile. Cows grazed in wide pastures, separated from the highway by thin fence. Their father owned cows now, cows and horses. He had become a farmer. Caleb remembered him talking about how he used to be a farmer before he got married, and how one day he would be one again, and how Caleb would help him, getting up in the morning and milking the cows and feeding the chickens. Caleb never believed him, and besides, it didn't sound fun.

Caleb woke up when the bus driver shouted, "Madison! Ten minutes!" Caleb was confused for moment--he couldn't remember falling asleep. He had to remember where he was.

Jacob was awake. He was reading a Richie Rich comic book.

Caleb looked outside. He'd been to Madison twice before, but nothing looked familiar. He checked his watch, then asked Jacob about his medication.

"I took it," he said.

"Ten minutes," Caleb said. It felt weird being that close to his father. He had grown used to his father being only a voice on the telephone and a letter every few weeks. "Are you ready?" he asked Jacob. "Are you all packed up?"

Jacob nodded. He put his comic book back in his pack.

Caleb felt a chill. He refused to let his body shake. He felt sick. Nine minutes, he thought. He tried to think of a joke, something interesting he could tell his father, but nothing came to mind. He thought maybe he could stay quiet, let his father do all the talking. And what about Ute? What was he supposed to say to her? Would she get an American joke? What if she didn't know how to speak English? Eight minutes.

Caleb looked over at his brother. Jacob had started talking to himself again, making a list of things he wanted from his father. "A horse to take home. He'll give me a horse, and we'll keep him in the back yard."

"He's not going to give you a horse," Caleb said. "Horses are too expensive. He's not that rich."

"He might give me a horse," Jacob said, then went back to his list.

"And a boat, and new wallpaper for my bedroom."

Caleb refused to listen. The minutes clicked down faster than they should have.

The bus pulled into the Madison station. "Madison," the bus driver said.

Caleb saw his father's truck, his blue pickup. A man was sitting on the hood. A woman with long blonde hair was on his lap. Caleb couldn't see the man's face, but he knew it was his father. The woman had to be Ute.

"Madison," the bus driver said again, and his voice seemed to have changed, became quieter, softer.

Caleb thought about staying on the bus, just going on wherever the bus went, going place to place and never stopping.

"Let's go," Jacob said. "This is it. We're here."

"No," Caleb said, "let's stay here a little longer. Let's make him come get us." He slouched in his seat, finding a more comfortable position. He knew it was wrong to even want to stay, but he was willing to stay on the bus as long as he had to, until he felt right about leaving. He had enough food in his backpack to stay for days, and he would, if he had to.

STONE SOUP

Clara was in the kitchen with the electrician. She was wrapping his hand with white gauze. I had followed a small trail of blood into the kitchen. "Anything wrong?" I asked.

"Cut my hand on some broken glass," the electrician said. He tried to raise his hand, but Clara pulled it back to the table.

"Mr. Weldon cut his hand on some broken glass," Clara said. "I was fixing it."

I wiped sweat off my brow and sat down. "How bad?" I asked.

"Looks worse than it really is," the electrician said.

"I told him he should see a doctor," Clara said, "but he refused. He said he didn't need it. I told him that if it's just a man thing, he doesn't have to pull anything on me. I've already seen it all." She looked over at me, the first eye contact we'd had since I entered the room.

Her hands were bloody. A pool of blood had formed on the kitchen table.

"I think Mr. Weldon might need some stitches," she said, and kept looking at me, as if I should confirm this.

"I can drive you into town if you need to see a doctor," I said. I took my hat off. Clara has tried to make me remember to take my hat off every time I come inside. The electrician had his cap in his good hand. I wondered if he had taken it off himself, or if Clara had made him do it.

"I don't need stitches," he said, standing up. He was a tall man with a solid look. He wasn't exactly muscular, but he looked solid, like a well-built house. He was taller than me by a good three inches. He was the largest thing in the kitchen, larger than the refrigerator. I refused to let him make me feel small, so I stood up.

He turned to me and started talking about the wiring, about what was wrong with it and saying that it would all have to be ripped out and replaced. He claimed the wiring we had was a fire hazard. I was not an expert on electrical matters, and I should have believed him, but I did not. I wanted the man to be a fraud.

The electrician was not a handsome man, but I felt jealous anyway, especially with Clara holding his hand the way she was. There was something about it, something inherently wrong, and maybe she was holding this man's hand a bit too tenderly. He and Clara had been alone all morning, and although I'd never had reason to question Clara's fidelity, I grew suspicious. I had been outside all morning in the heat and the sun, and sometimes that type of weather can fill my head with thoughts that

aren't my own. Heat has a way of getting inside men's heads: more crimes of passion are committed in hot climates than cold. This is a proven statistic. Hot weather breeds jealousy.

I had never been a jealous man until Clara. She was beautiful in a way that made me instinctively possessive. Clara, for her part, was a good wife, a perfect wife, and she never took my jealousy to heart. She allowed me my jealous streak because she believed it was evidence of how much I loved her.

I asked the electrician how long the rewiring would take.

"A week," he said. "If there aren't any more delays." He looked down at his bandaged hand, then nodded at me as if we shared a secret language of gestures and unspoken words.

I nodded back. I didn't like this man, and I found this hard to believe. I try to like people. I go out of my way to try to like people, which only made it more difficult for me not to like this man. It was as if I had to work at it. We had only spoken twice, once on the telephone, and there in the kitchen. I'd already gone out for work by the time he'd come that morning.

"How much is this going to run, costwise?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I haven't seen enough to make an estimate." he shrugged. "How much do you think a job like this should run?"

It was odd that this man did not know how to price his own services. I didn't answer.

The silence was awkward. Clara stood up. Her chair scraped loudly against the floor as she stood.

"Let me put it another way," the electrician said. "How much would you be willing to pay for a job like this?"

"One hundred dollars a day," I said. I don't know how I arrived at this figure.

He shook his head. "That's way too low," he said. "I'm a professional."

"Are you two going to haggle?" Clara asked. "Tell me if you are so I can leave."

"This isn't haggling," the electrician said. "This is professional pricing."

"I can't afford more than \$100 per day."

"Don't think of this in days," the electrician said. "Think of the whole job. I'm going to have to rip out all the wiring in this house and replace it. Call around. You're not going to find anyone willing to do this sort of work cheap. This isn't just replacing a faulty socket. Hell, that would be easy. I'd do that gratis. Getting to wire without ripping off the

walls, that's not easy. It requires real skill and real work. I'm not just an electrician. I'm an artist. Ask around. I've got references."

Clara glared at me. I tried to ignore it.

"Still," I said, "I just can't afford more than \$100 a day, six days top."

The electrician smiled. "Okay," he said, offering me his good hand to shake the deal closed, "sealed and settled. Sealed and settled."

"Is that all over?" Clara asked. "Good. Mr. Weldon, would you like a drink? Some lemonade? Ice water?"

"Water's fine," he said, very politely.

"Tom," Clara said, "get Mr. Weldon a glass of water."

I filled a tall glass with water, then dropped two ice cubes in. Water spilled out over the side of the glass. I handed the electrician the glass, and he took it greedily.

He finished the water with one swallow, then started to chew on an ice cube. Then he fainted. I caught him before he hit the floor. The glass dropped from his hand, but did not break. It hit the floor and rolled under the table. I watched that glass. I did not look at or think of anything except that glass.

"Well," Clara said, as if she had been expecting this all along.

I set the electrician gently on the floor. Clara knelt down next to him. She refused to let herself look surprised. "Loss of blood, I suspect," she said, nodding.

I picked the second ice cube up off the floor and rubbed it across the electrician's forehead. His eyes jerked open immediately. Clara put a hand to his cheek. "Take him to the hospital," she said.

"Come with?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I'll stay here and clean up." She stood up.

From the floor, I could see up her skirt. I wondered if the electrician was looking too, but when I looked at him, I could tell there was no need to trace the line of his vision. He was still dazed.

I helped him up. No one spoke. I kissed Clara on the cheek. I took my hat from the table.

The electrician stood uneasily. I tried to steady him without really touching him by putting my hand behind his shoulder. I was expecting him to fall again, but he didn't. We walked clumsily to the car. Clara stood at the door, not waving, not smiling, just watching.

The hospital was a half-hour drive, all gravel until we hit Walnut Street. Walnut completely circled the town, serving as an unofficial border between the town and everything else.

The electrician tried to pass the time with small talk. "Who wired that house?" he asked.

"Clara's father."

"I knew it wasn't a professional job. I'll be frank, Mr. Rice. Your house is a fire waiting to happen. Every time you run more power than a clock radio you're lucky the house doesn't go up in flames. The man who did that wiring could've been a person a unquestionable character, but he didn't know anything about electricity." He shook his head. "Damn it," he continued, "this is the sort of thing that just pisses an electrician off. People don't realize how dangerous electricity is. Even professionals. I've heard stories about guys who electrocuted themselves doing simple things because they overlooked simple safety precautions." He was gesturing strongly with his bloody hand. Drops of blood spattered on the windshield. "I'm giving you a good price because I don't like to see anyone hurt. I don't want your house to burn. Don't think I'm being some kind of saint. This is just simple human decency." He set his hand back down on his lap. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?" he asked, but didn't give me time to answer. "Maybe I am. Maybe I'm crazy, and maybe I'm not the smartest person in the world, but I know electricity." He shook his head. "Sorry for carrying on like this," he said, very quietly, almost a whisper. He paused, took a deep

breath, then looked as if he might say something, but didn't. The pause grew into a full minute of silence. "Mind if I smoke?" he asked, finally.

"I'm allergic to smoke," I said. I don't know why I felt compelled to lie about this.

"You don't like me," he said. "You think I'm crazy."

"I don't know you."

"Well, I don't care. You don't have to like me. I don't need your approval." He started gesturing with his bloody hand again. "I know you can afford more than \$100 a day, but I don't care. It doesn't bother me. I like your house. I don't want to read about it burning down. I like your wife. I don't want to hear about her dying in a tragic house fire. Understand me?"

I stopped the car. Hard. The electrician lurched forward, almost striking his head against the windshield.

"What the hell are you getting at? What do you want from me?" I asked, and I tried to restrain myself, but I could hear myself shouting. "You want me to thank you? You want me to apologize?"

"Hey, lighten up. You'll get an ulcer. I'm sorry. I get carried away sometimes. It comes with the job. I'm wired all the time." He gave me a moment to get his joke, then added, "Get it? Wired."

Even if the joke had been any good, I wouldn't have laughed. I would've made a conscious effort to restrain any laugh. There was another minute of silence.

"Mind if I turn on the radio?" he asked.

"Go ahead," I said.

"I'm usually not like this," he offered. "I never talk. Must be the hand. Maybe it's the heat. Heat ever make you a little crazy?"

"No," I said.

"Same here," he said. He turned on the radio. Elvis Presley was singing "Can't Help Falling in Love." "Elvis," the electrician said. He smiled and leaned back.

We hit Walnut, and the electrician didn't speak again until we pulled into the hospital parking lot. "Well," he said, "here we are."

I called Clara from a pay phone. She said she was making dinner, and that she would be setting a third place.

"Why?" I asked. "We don't owe that man anything."

"You're jealous again," she said. I was hoping she would have asked this, made it a question so I could have had a chance to defend myself in the answer, but she didn't. She declared it.

That's what made me mad, but not at her. I was mad at myself because she was right. I was mad at the electrician for causing all this. I

was mad at Clara's father for his bad wiring, for making the electrician necessary in the first place.

"I'm not jealous," I said, and I knew she could tell I was lying. "He's just an electrician. We pay him. We don't have to feed him."

"You're jealous. Let's not argue, okay? Just tell Mr. Weldon that he's welcome for dinner."

"Okay," I said. "I will."

"Do it."

"I said I would."

"I didn't believe you."

"I'll do it," I said. "I promise." I told her I loved her, and she told me she loved me, but this didn't solve anything. I was still angry when I hung up. I kicked the wall under the phone.

I sat down next to a man holding a bloody handkerchief to his cheek. He looked at me as if he were trying to place me. I tried not to look at him, but I couldn't help it.

"Fencing accident," he said, without warning.

"What?"

"You're wondering about my cheek. It was a fencing accident."

He was dressed entirely in white, except for the speckles of blood down his shirt. When I hear the word fencing, I thought about real fences,

and all I could think of was how this man did not look like he had just been out laying fences.

"Putting in a new fence?" I asked.

"No," he said, "*fencing*." He gestured with his hands. "You know, with swords. I run the fencing club at the high school."

"Oh," I said. I still could not get the image of this man digging postholes out of my head.

"One of the boys got a little carried away."

I asked him if he should've been wearing a mask, and he said he hadn't put it on because he thought he would need it. "No one ever slashes at the face," he added.

A nurse arrived and called his name. He left with her, and I picked up a magazine. *Time*. The photograph of the exploding Challenger was on the cover. I flipped through the pages without really reading anything. It was all old news.

I put the magazine down and looked at the clock. It was one of those with no second hand that clicked heavily with each minute. The electrician had been gone for half an hour. There were some wanted posters hanging on the wall. I paged through the thick stack, hoping I would find the electrician on one, but I didn't. Apparently he was not a criminal.

There were two women along all the men on the wall. One was wanted for mail fraud, and the other for armed robbery and escape. I noticed that the men looked straight at the camera, but the women refused to face it directly. They both looked just to the side of the camera.

The electrician returned. His hand was wrapped neatly. It was a much cleaner job of bandaging than what Clara had managed, but this was not Clara's line of work. Clara did the best she could as a non-professional. I felt proud of her.

The electrician lifted his hand. "Thirteen stitches," he said. "Thanks for waiting."

"No problem," I said. I didn't want to invite him to dinner, but I had to. I had promised Clara.

He accepted immediately, then after a short pause, asked me if I'd have any problems with it. I could tell that he knew it was Clara's invitation, not mine.

I didn't answer. It seemed the best way to tell him I didn't want him there.

The ride home was completely silent. We didn't even listen to the radio.

I started to think about the electrician in terms of a fight. I wondered if I could take him. I wondered how fast he was. He was a big

man, but I was sure I could take him if I got the first punch in. I would aim for the face, see if I could shatter his nose. I'd never been prone to violent thoughts, but I couldn't help myself.

Clara was waiting at the door. "How's your hand?" she asked the electrician.

"Okay, I guess," he said. He looked down at the ground.

She took his hand in hers, then asked for specifics.

"Thirteen stitches."

Clara flinched. "I didn't think they could fit that many stitches in one hand," she said. She asked the electrician if I had invited him for dinner.

I hated the feeling of not being trusted. I hated the electrician. I could never be mad at Clara. She had some kind of hold over me. I married her two days after I met her. It was that kind of love. It was complete. Most people will never know the kind of love Clara and I had. Most people just have pieces of love. Clara and I had all of it, the whole thing--which is why I got jealous sometimes. It was like having a perfect treasure. I never wanted to lose even a piece of it. I walked over to Clara and kissed her on the cheek.

"Sorry about Tom," she said to the electrician. "He gets a little jealous."

"That's okay," he said. "It's understandable."

We all went inside. Clara had cleaned the blood off the floor. I pictured her on her hands and knees, scrubbing the floor with an old rag. It was the first time I had ever imagined her in the act of cleaning. I blamed the electrician for forcing her to work so hard. I hated how he had made her do more work than what was called for. Although the house was always clean, I had never wanted to believe that Clara had to work in any way to keep it clean. I pictured her delicately standing above everything while angels cleaned and scoured.

The kitchen smelled of garlic.

"Smells delicious," the electrician said.

"It's a shrimp pie," Clara said.

"Shrimp pie?" I asked.

"It's a new recipe. I wanted to try something new."

I opened the oven and looked in. I wanted the pie to look delicious, immediately inviting, but it just looked odd. I trusted that by serving time, though, it would look perfect. I could've sworn there would be a finishing touch that would fix everything. I thought of the fairy story about stone soup--the one about the young girl who tricks her miserly uncle into giving her all the ingredients to make a fine soup. I knew Clara would be the

young girl, but the more I thought about this, the more uncomfortable I felt. I couldn't place myself in the story.

I thought I'd have to create a new part, a young boyfriend for the girl. I'd even create a part for the electrician: the cross-town rival no one liked, the only one in town who never gets a bowl of soup. I closed the oven door. "Looks good," I said.

"I think it looks a little funny," Clara said.

"Looks don't matter with food," the electrician said. "Taste does." He straightened his posture, and I hated his smugness. I could tell he thought he'd just made some sort of deep point.

"That's what I always say," Clara said. She patted the electrician on the shoulder. "Dinner won't be ready for another hour," she said, then told me to take the electrician to the living room to wait. "Show Mr. Weldon the bathroom," she added, "in case he wants to wash up." She opened the kitchen door for us.

The electrician thanked Clara for everything, then followed me into the living room. I pointed out the bathroom to him, and he thanked me.

I went back to the kitchen. Clara was making a salad. She was wearing the white apron my sister had given her for Christmas.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"Just go out there and entertain our guest," she said, while slicing a tomato evenly without looking at it.

"Our guest," I mumbled. "More like your guest."

Clara sent me back to the living room. The electrician was standing near the piano, looking awkwardly around. He played a few notes gently with his good hand. He asked if I played or did Clara.

"We both do."

"You any good?"

"Good enough," I said.

"That's about how good I am," he said. "I bet you wife's excellent."

I saw through his flattery. He was trying to deflate me by complimenting my wife. It didn't work. I scowled.

"In the old days," he said, "music used to be the primary source for entertainment. People would throw parties just to show off their new sheet music."

I sat down on the arm of my recliner. I thought he was building toward a speech, but he just stopped.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" he asked, after a long while.

"Depends on the question," I said, a fairly standard response.

He said he hadn't thought of the question yet, but would ask it when it came to him. He smiled.

We had another long silence. He paged through Clara's sheet music.

"Who likes Chopin?" he asked.

"Is that it? Is that your question?"

"Just *a* question, not *the* question."

I hated the conversation he was trying to make. Our dislike for each other was palpable, and I was willing to leave it at that. I'd always thought that it was more honest for people who hate each other not even to pretend to be polite. I hated myself when I saw myself being amiable to people I hated.

"Clara likes Chopin," I said.

"I'm big on Chopin," the electrician said. "The Nocturnes mostly. You ever listen to the Nocturnes? Chopin knew what darkness was like. The Nocturnes are the most honest pieces of music every written."

"Clara likes Chopin. I don't." I thought this would shut him up.

"I've got the question," he said. "What would you rather be, blind or deaf?"

"That's a dumb question."

"It tells a lot about people. I heard this on the radio once."

"Deaf," I said without thinking. "I'd rather be deaf."

"Why?"

Had I been thinking, I would not have answered that question, but I just kept going. "Because if I were blind," I said, "I couldn't see Clara."

"Nice answer," the electrician said. He was grinning foolishly.

Clara entered. I felt the urge to tell her I loved her, but I checked it. This was not the sort of thing I was willing to say in front of an electrician.

Clara asked the electrician if he played the piano, and when he said he did, they talked about music for a bit. I didn't listen until he asked her to play something for us.

"Maybe after dinner," she said. She blushed.

I stood up. I felt that the man had overstepped his limits. He was just an electrician. I wanted to challenge him to a fight. I clenched my fists.

Clara looked over at me. "Tom," she said, very calmly, "could you help me in the kitchen?"

I followed her into the kitchen. She told me to stop acting like a child.

"I'm not," I said, but this did not convince her.

She told me I was just going through one of my crazy jealous moods, making it sound like a common-place occurrence. I told her it wasn't crazy. I told her I hated to see that electrician flirting so blatantly.

"Flirting? He asked me to play the piano. That's not flirting. That's polite conversation."

I apologized, although I knew I was right. I had an immediate sensation that the electrician was listening to us through the kitchen door.

"There's no reason to be jealous," Clara said. "He's just an electrician. He won't sweep me off my feet. He won't steal me away from you. I can't tell if you realize that or not. Now, go offer him some wine."

I went back into the living room. The electrician was standing by the window, looking out at the sunset. I asked him if he wanted some wine before dinner.

"No," he said, "no, thank you. I shouldn't drink. Doctor's orders."

I sat down on the couch. I flicked the television on with the remote. A baseball game was on. I never like baseball, but I wanted to be watching something so I wouldn't have to talk.

Clara came in from the kitchen. "Did Tom ask you if you wanted some wine, Mr. Weldon?" she asked.

The electrician confirmed that I had, and Clara headed back to the kitchen.

"She really checks up on you, doesn't she?" he asked me.

I stood up. "What do you mean by that?" I asked, and I tried to make this sound calm, but I clenched my hands.

"Just that it must be great to be loved like that."

I did not sit down. I did not unclench my fists. I did not say anything.

"She's a beautiful woman. You're a lucky man."

I thanked him. I didn't know what he was getting at, but he was playing me right. I knew he was manipulating me, but I couldn't do anything about it.

"I'm an expert at beautiful things," he said.

"Bullshit," I said, and this shocked me. I hardly ever swore.

"No, really." He took a deep breath. "When I was little," he continued, "about five or so, the doctors thought I was going to be blind. They were sure of it. They wanted my mother to teach me Braille, send me to a school for the disabled, but she wouldn't. She took me to art museums. She bought me beautiful picturebooks. She wanted me to see as many beautiful things as I could before I went blind. I learned how to look at things. We flew to Paris. I saw the *Mona Lisa*. Turns out I didn't go blind. The doctors were wrong. My mother said my eyes cured themselves by working so hard to see beautiful things." He paused, as if to let me suck in the meaning of this story, then continued, "When I say I'm an expert on beautiful things, I have the evidence to back it up. I've got my eyes."

"Bullshit," I said again.

"It's all true." He crossed his heart. "Come look at the sunset."

I did. It was nothing extraordinary, burning red and descending slowly behind the mountains, an absolutely normal sunset.

"For me, it's a different sunset every second. The way the red plays on the leaves of the trees. On the clouds. On the ground. It's changing every second."

I didn't see anything of what he was talking about, and I swear I was trying. The frustration was painful. Then I hit him. Sucker punched him, a punch to the stomach. It didn't feel as good as I thought it would, but it still felt good.

He barely flinched. "I expected that," he said. He smiled. "You're jealous. I get that a lot. I inspire bad feelings."

I went to hit him again, but he caught my hand. The stitches in the hand opened immediately, and he started to bleed again. "Damn," he said.

Clara didn't hear any of this. I am truly grateful for that.

"Once is enough," the electrician said, releasing my hand. His bandage was soaked through with blood. "I should leave," he said. "You'll never see me again, okay?"

We shook hands. "Sealed and settled," he said. He recommended another local electrician. "He'll give you the same price. If he hassles you, tell him I'll cover the difference. Thank your wife for everything." He left

through the front door. I watched his truck as he pulled out of the driveway.

Clara said it was lucky that the electrician had left. The shrimp pie was a disaster. After dinner she played Chopin. I had never noticed that she really wasn't very good. She kept making small mistakes, nothing singularly jarring, but they added up.

We made love that night, and after I asked her what was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

"You," she said after a moment of deliberation. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"No," I said, shaking my head, "really. I'm serious."

"I don't know," she said. "That's a hard question. It's not something I usually think about."

I wanted her to give me a real answer because I didn't have one. I asked her again.

"Go to sleep," she said. "You're talking silly."

I apologized, then turned off the light. Clara closed her eyes and was asleep immediately. I tried to sleep, but couldn't. I turned the light back on and looked at her. I studied her like a painting. I tapped her on

her shoulder and whispered, "Wake up, wake up." I wanted to tell her something, to tell her I loved her, to tell her she was truly beautiful, but as I said the words to myself in my head, they all sounded insincere. She curled up and held her pillow tighter, holding it with all her strength, crushing it. I turned the light off and let her sleep.